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A READING
OF THE LIFE OF SIMON SRUGI
&
THE SALESIAN COMMUNITY
AT BEITGEMAL
(1891–1958)
IN THE LIGHT OF FAITH

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– A Reading of the Life of Simon Srugi and the Salesian Community at Beitgemal (1891–1958) in the Light of Faith

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*To Brother Angelo Bormida,
the first to keep the memory alive
of what took place at Beitgemal.
He became a true disciple of Jesus,
in the spirit that we can call "Beitgemelian",
forgiving his persecutors while he lay dying.*

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Abbreviations and acronyms¹

ACB	<i>Archivio Comunità Beitgemal</i> (Community Archives, Beitgemal) Bet Shemes, Israel.
AGC	Acts of the General Council (Chapter) of the Salesian Society.
AG	VATICAN COUNCIL II, Council Decree <i>Ad Gentes</i> on the Church's pastoral activity, 7 December 1965 in <i>Enchiridion vaticanum</i> , 1. Official Documents of the Holy See 1971. English translation taken from https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html
AIMOR	<i>Archivio Ispettorale Medio Oriente</i> (Province Archives, Middle East). Bethlehem, Palestine.
ASC	<i>Archivio Salesiano Centrale</i> (Salesian Central Archives) Rome, Italy.
C	Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales, S.D.B., 1984.
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church, LEV, Vatican City, 1992.
FMA	(Institute of the) Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.
GS	VATICAN COUNCIL II Pastoral Constitution <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> on the Church in the modern world, 7 December 1965, in <i>Enchiridion vaticanum</i> , 1. Official Documents of the Holy See 1971. English translation taken from https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html
<i>Informatio</i>	<i>Informatio, in Positio super virtutibus. Beatificationis et Canonizaionis Servi Dei Simoneis Srugi Laici Professi Societatis Salesianae</i> , Rome, 1988, 1-233.

¹ Biblical and patristic sources and documents of the magisterium are indicated by the acronyms and abbreviations in use

- LG VATICAN COUNCIL II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21. November 1964, in *Enchiridion vaticanum*, 1. Official Documents of the Holy See 1971. English translation taken from https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html
- MOR Salesian Middle East Province: "Jesus the Adolescent".
- Positiones* *Positiones seu articuli, in Positio super virtutibus. Beatificationis et seu articuli Canonizaionis Servi Dei Simoneis Srugi Laici Professi Societatis Salesianae*, Rome, 1988, 1-50.
- SDB Salesians of Don Bosco.
- Summ.* *Summarium, in Positio super virtutibus. Beatificationis et Canonizaionis Servi Dei Simoneis Srugi Laici Professi Societatis Salesi* Rome, 1988, 1-381.

Presentation

From the outset, three criteria have guided me in the choice of this current work of research, in expectation of the following results:

That the final contributions could be useful for myself and those close to me.

That I can bring the two components of my curriculum into dialogue with each other: spiritual theology and the study of formation.

That there be a real effort at dialogue between faith, culture and life.

Usefulness: Areas of study develop thanks to creative or in-depth reinterpretations of understandings that are held as common heritage. What is true for all of them is true for the two that particularly concern me: theology and pedagogy. But honestly, I am not interested in advancing knowledge for the sake of knowledge. My interest is in strengthening the mental structures that I have built up over many years of study to the point where they allow me to take an intelligent approach to the circumstances I will have to face day after day. This research, then, is aimed especially at giving me the tools for this, my life's task; I then hope that it can be of some use for those in my land of mission: the Salesians of the Middle East. If my thesis is also a contribution to knowledge or can be of benefit to others: *Deo Gratias!* But of course that is just a plus.

Curricular dialogue: I belong to one of the very first generations to obtain a degree in "Spiritual Theology / Formation of formators and those involved in vocational ministry". I am convinced that this academic path is the result of a very intelligent intuition which deserves to be deepened and developed. Therefore it seems to me to be appropriate to express the intention to carry out a serene and enriching dialogue² between the two approaches, seeking an integration, including a scientific integration, of the two areas: spiritual theology and pedagogical method.

Dialogue between faith, culture and life: on behalf of the University I feel that I am an ambassador of the real experience that the Salesians of the Middle East have to tackle (and therefore it seems both correct and enriching to deal with the University from our point

² I speak of the intention to dialogue not because it is a complete novelty but because theology and pedagogy (in their development as areas of study) have rightly sought to defend their autonomy; and now this new curriculum allows us to take a scientifically interdisciplinary approach. It is this opportunity I am thinking to benefit from.

of view as well); and at the same time, on behalf of my confreres in the Middle East, I am an ambassador of the perspectives and deeper understandings offered by the University; but this service of mediation is one I achieve with and through my life (it cannot be otherwise). This mediation is being achieved by a young Latin American, a missionary, newly-ordained priest with his own history, with certain well-hidden virtues and many very clear defects, with dreams, fears, and an overwhelming desire to arrive in his field of work. This is who I am: with all my very real artistic, pastoral, spiritual sensitivities that *a priori*, almost without explicitly wanting to, choose what to communicate from one to the other.

The above criteria have led me to my choice of topic: *A reading of the life of Simon Srugi and the Salesian community at Beitgemal (1891–1958) in the light of faith. Elements for a Salesian spirituality in the Middle East*. My reasons will be amply justified in the introduction and first chapter.

Here, I would only like to emphasise the awareness, one I have always had, of having chosen a somewhat wide-ranging topic. This choice has its merits and limitations. At the same time, I very soon came to the realisation that I was obliged to use more archival and not so much bibliographical material as a main source.

Because of the wide-ranging nature of the work, I present many aspects without, however, the opportunity to carry out major in-depth studies. I also confirmed that such a work requires an historical, even literary basis, which I do not have.

However, the choices I made offered me the possibility of coming across some wonderful surprises... and indeed these occurred. Read on. For my part, I feel satisfied that I have been faithful to the three criteria explained earlier.

I would like to conclude by thanking God for all the formative opportunities he has given me. I would also like to thank the two main characters in this work, Brothers Angelo Bormida and Simon Srugi, for their testimony. For me they are the most effective encouragement for being creatively faithful in my vocation as a Salesian in the Middle East. I thank the Pontifical Salesian University for its precious service in my intellectual formation: and I would especially like to thank the lecturers from the Institute of Spiritual Theology in the person of its Director, Jesús Manuel Garcia. My thanks also to the lecturers from the FSE, in the person of Giuseppe Roggia and outside lecturers such as Amedeo Cencini... I thank my Provincial, Fr Maurizio Spreafico and the current community at Beitgemal (Frs Antonio, Domenico, Attilio, Bro, Adelino, Frs Giuseppe, Wieslaw, Violetta, Leila, Simonet) for their acceptance, witness and dedication to the mission in this “Holy Land”. To all of you my heartfelt thanks.

Rome, 24 May 2011

Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians.

Introduction

Human beings were born to remember, and memory is necessary in order to live fully. Obviously, not memory as the simple ability to mentally preserve everything that has happened, but an intelligent and attentive memory, one able to recall and coordinate, grasp the deeper meaning of events and relive them...

The Salesian community at Beitgemal in Israel, with more than 120 years of history, is heir to and custodian of so many riches and resources; of highly qualified experiences of holiness, of expressions of faith that have been severely tested by the difficult political, economic, social, religious and ecclesial situations that the Salesians have had to face in the history of the community.

But this history runs the risk of being forgotten, and with that we would also lose the spiritual wealth that God has raised up in that land: custodian not only of biblical memories but also of Salesian holiness.

Therefore, we can consider a reading, an interpretation of the history of Beitgemal in the light of faith to be both valuable and opportune as a re-appropriation of the past (convinced that God has been active in it), so we can better understand for the present what the identity of the Salesians in the Middle East really is, tackling the current situation as a time of grace. And finally, opening up memory, reason and will to the action of the Spirit who continues to guide the Salesians of the Middle east into the future.

My concern is not so much an historico-critical study of events in the Beitgemal community, nor is it one of offering a plan for optimising pastoral activity in this community. Rather is it one of offering an interpretation of the history of the community, rereading it in faith, in order to help the confreres of the entire MOR Province to take ownership of it, taking on board the brightest but also the darkest moments, the experiences of holiness but also those of sin, convinced that God has been present throughout this history and mysteriously guiding it at all times. It is God who is now inviting us to integrate it all and allow it all to be redeemed in the mystery of his Pasch, preserving these works of God in memory, seeking to grasp the theological and spiritual elements that are identifiable for the formation of confreres who currently belong to the MOR Provincial community, but also for the formation of the new generations. Hence, the constant question that will accompany the research is the following: What has God

inspired in the community of Beitgemal that will help the confreres of the Province today to grow in their identity as Salesians in the Middle East?

Here is how the work develops:

Chapter One offers the epistemological foundations on which the work is based, even though they state and justify the choices made, namely: why the interpretation of the history of a community in the light of faith, why Beitgemal and, finally, why the focus on the period from 1891 to 1958. Chapter Two presents the Salesian community at Beitgemal: Initially, a chronology will be presented through the terms of office of its many Rectors, followed by a summary of the life and presence of the confreres in the community (clerics, brothers, priests, sick and elderly confreres) and finally a biographical presentation of the most important figures. Chapter Three spends time with the figure of Simon Srugi: a presentation of his life, his vocation and formation, and his spirituality.

Chapter Four proposes a reading of Beitgemal's experience in the light of faith, trying to grasp the theological and spiritual elements that emerge from it.

Chapter Five identifies the spiritual and formative elements that can contribute to the effort to renew the identity of the Salesians in the Middle East and their sense of belonging to the Provincial community. Finally, the Conclusion identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the work and possible further work.

The main sources are archival: made up of the house chronicles of the Beitgemal community (32 notebooks of detailed news items and 4 summaries of certain periods), mortuary letters of the confreres (88), biographies of the most significant confreres, various letters, the *Positio* for Simon Srugi's Process, and his writings (6 notebooks with *reminders*, the collection of his retreat resolutions and various other material).

These sources are found in three archives: the Salesian Central Archives (ACS); the Middle East Province Archives (AIMOR); the Archives of the Beitgemal Community (ACB). The research began by going to AIMOR where I had the opportunity to investigate for a period of three weeks. AIMOR is well organised; perhaps with many gaps or missing information. There I managed to identify an early list of Salesians who had lived at Beitgemal,³ find the mortuary letters, read various pieces of information on the nature and shape of the community, the problem of ownership of lands and some notes that referred me to the House Chronicle of the Bethlehem community where the details of the events of "the question of the Arab confreres" are recounted, as well as the captivating story of Bro. Angelo Bormida and truly precious information on the life of Fr Rosin, which is generally unknown. Finally, I found the original writings of Simon Srugi (which

³ But it wasn't complete until all the information was found in the ACS.

I was certain had never been transcribed nor published) so I undertook this task in order to be able to use them in this research and disseminate their memory.

After this I spent another three weeks in the Beitgemal community where I found archives mostly made up of sheets of paper, and this I have called the ACB. The community chronicles and various documents are found there. In order to develop chapter two, I set myself the task of reading all the chronicles⁴ and writing up a summary of them.

Finally, in the ACS I found the missing information on lists of Salesians; the *Positio* for Simon Srugi, and various other material: the most interesting were the exchanges of letters found in the folders: ASC 31.22 *MO*, ASC 38 *Betlemme*, ASC 38 *Beitgemal*, ASC 275 *Belloni*.

From the sequence of chapters it is clear that the approach used will be specifically one of spiritual theology, and then an historical and theological one in its two components: initially taking into consideration the history of the Beitgemal community inasmuch as this can be drawn from the sources, analysing it from an historical-critical point of view and then interpreting it through theological criteria, seeking to determine the spiritual constants that can contribute to outlining the identity of the Salesians in the Middle East.

⁴ With the difficulty of finding periods with plenty of information while others had very little.

Chapter One

Epistemological Bases and Choices

*“But take care and watch yourselves closely,
so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen,
nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life;
Make them known to your children and your children’s children” (Dt 4:9).*

The human being is born to remember, and memory is necessary in order to live fully. In fact, our way of looking at our past is one of the truest indicators of our maturity today and even of the quality of our faith. We are children of our past, generated by it. So very often do we return to it to discover our roots, to understand our life today, to weep over it, to reconcile it with our own past, or to deny it and forget about it.

Authentic recall, meaning knowing how to interpret history in the light of faith, is the only way for achieving the integration of our own identity. The individual, the community, the charismatic group cannot fully embrace and express their identity in a single moment. They need a series of experiences and different situations that enrich and gradually unveil their identity.

An interpretation of our history in the light of faith is not a spontaneous nor even automatic activity. It demands serious spiritual work to blend past history and the complexity of present reality in a full and harmonious manner.

As a member of the Salesian Middle East Province, I feel in communion with so many confreres who, in one way or another, express this desire to re-appropriate our history in order to strengthen our faith, charism and identity.

Convinced that God has written our history over these 120 years of Salesian presence in the Middle East, there is a profound desire to draw wisdom from this history so as to face the challenges of the present with greater maturity of faith.

In order to offer a significant contribution to this spiritual work of our Province, in this thesis I propose an in-depth study of some elements for a Salesian spirituality in the Middle East through an interpretation of the history of the Salesian community of Beitgemal in the light of faith. Our discipleship of Christ, precisely in fidelity to him who called us there – to the places that saw his human life and the unfolding of the early Christian communities – and to the Spirit who enriched us with particular gifts, must be marked by two adjectives: our discipleship must be Salesian and Middle Eastern.

A recapitulation of our history in the light of faith is an unavoidable task in order to respond to the challenges of consolidating Salesian charismatic identity, of making a serious effort at inculturation, of reinforcing in the confreres the sense of belonging to the Provincial community and of planning serious ways of integration into the Province by both local confreres and missionaries.

1. Reading history in the light of faith

Historia magistra vitae, says the famous line from Cicero.

In the fields of Spiritual Theology and Education, this Latin aphorism is currently being refined and clarified in its various aspects, while at the same time gaining unimaginable depth. To the point where in some ways it becomes a fundamental criterion for the two approaches.

For theology, history is fundamental because the dialogue between man and God, under the sign of the Spirit, is carried out within the framework of human experience. God gave himself to us in history and as history, and by giving it back its original meaning he made history become *salvation history*.

Spiritual theology revolves around the mystery of Christ as lived in faith by the people of God at an experiential level. The process of this Christian experience is the encounter between God who gives himself and the human being who believes, welcoming God himself in faith and love. But the specific nature of spiritual theology is found in the fact that it focuses its attention on the life and history communicated by the Father in Christ through the Spirit, in order to grasp the theological dynamic of the Christian experience in this, and to understand how to arrive at communion with God.⁵

For the area of study known as Educational Pedagogy, learning from history, especially from one's own history or from the common history which one must appropriate, is a fundamental and irreplaceable task for any candidate to consecrated or

⁵ Cf. J.M. GARCÍA, *La teologia spirituale oggi. Verso una descrizione del suo statuto epistemologico*, in *La teologia spirituale. Atti del Congresso Internazionale OCD (Rome 24-29 April 2000)*, Rome, OCD/Teresianum, 2001, 205-238.

priestly life. The formand will be truly such when his faith succeeds in interpreting history and penetrating its deeper meaning, while his own history – passed and present – offers constant new impetus and arguments, content and motivation and at times also questions and challenges to faith. And so together, faith and history discover the original action of God who saves, or what makes each person's human existence a 'story of salvation' an entirely personal story, invented by God and lived by human beings.⁶

Certainly, saying *Historia magistra vitae* could simply be a nice slogan. In order to overcome this difficulty and make in-depth study a real instrument of help and reflection in spiritual and formative accompaniment, the criteria offered by both the disciplines of spiritual theology and formation are very valuable.

1.1. *Christian spiritual experience in spiritual theology*

When we speak of Christian spiritual experience we do not intend to point to something solely subjective or experiential, but we refer to integral and authentic human experience which constitutes genuine Christian knowledge and, therefore, is a theological category.

In this sense, it is possible to hypothesise a theological foundation of the Christian experience in its originality; not going beyond faith, but leading it back to faith precisely because... there is no faith that is not historical and no understanding of faith that is not an understanding of history and that does not derive its questions and the search for answers from history.⁷

Christian spiritual experience relies on many structures, first and foremost on the faith as transmitted by the Church and received as an objective datum; and secondly on the sacraments, through the divine life is communicated to us in the prolongation of Christ's paschal mystery.

Christian life, the specific object of the study of spiritual theology, is strictly Christian because it is based on the objectivity of the Christ event. Therefore, it reflects on the experience of a revealed divine Truth that has its own characteristics, including a perpetuity that removes it from the constantly 'becoming' nature of human history. Before being a "human stance" spirituality is presence, grace, a gift of the Spirit of God. This is why spiritual theology, which upholds experience and history as a source of wisdom, knows that it needs the support and verification of knowledge from systematic theology.

⁶ Cf. A. CENCINI, *L'Albero della vita. Verso un modello di formazione iniziale e permanente*, Milan, San Paolo, 2005, 229.

⁷ J.M. GARCÍA, *Teologia dell'esperienza*, 119.

For spiritual theology, *history* becomes *magistra vitae* if one accepts the paradox of the asymmetrically interdependent relationship of the objective and subjective components of the Christian life as the believer's participation in divine life.⁸ Therefore, if spiritual theology emphasises lived experience as theological wisdom, it knows that the more authentic it is, the more it is subjected in charity and in the freedom and creativity of the children of God to the experience that already emerges in a normative way in Sacred Scripture and that is crystallised in a privileged way in the experience of the saints, throughout the rich path of ecclesial tradition.

*1.2 Life speaks if there is a heart that will listen*⁹

For their part, the formation sciences warn us of a twofold danger in the relationship between life (history) and formation (wisdom).

It has often been a mistake to devalue the internalisation of experience as a legitimate and theological approach to understanding reality. Rather, a very theoretical vision has been promoted with the assumption that formation consists in learning about faith and good morals, and the rest would develop automatically, because according to Plato's thinking, one cannot know good and not practise it. But history has amply demonstrated the naivety, at least in part, of this notion.

Instead, there is a need to overcome the pattern that assumes knowing or memorising all the truths of the faith, explaining them according to a proper systematic theology and the moral behaviour derived from them as the main task of formation:

How poor our religious culture is [and by analogy our formation as consecrated individuals] can become frighteningly clear to us if we reflect on how little we are practised in understanding God from our own life, or this life from his guidance. Christian existence should also mean that we are sustained not only by a theoretical conviction, but by the living knowledge that He guides our lives. But then every event would contain a self-manifestation of God and thus a knowledge of ourselves.¹⁰

A more modern and avant-garde experiential approach to reality is also wrong, but similarly naive. This view of things assumes that the correct understanding of reality is

⁸ Faith is presented as a process in which there is a continuous interaction between the objective, which gives form, and the subjective, which is founded and constituted by it. In fact one cannot enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ except in faith, in the very act in which faith establishes this relationship, where the object of faith is personalised. In other words, the Truth of God (*fides quae*) is not the product of human response (*fides qua*), even if it is in the decision to believe that it can be perceived. Cf. A. STAGLIANO, *La teologia «che serve»*. *Sul compito scientifico-ecclesiale del teologo per la nuova evangelizzazione*, Turin, SEI, 1996, 92.

⁹ Cf. A. MANENTI, *Vivere gli ideali, II. Fra paura e desiderio*, Bologna, EDB, 2001.

¹⁰ R. GUARDINI, *Accettare se stessi*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1992, 32-33.

something very simple, almost intuitive, something that can be calmly entrusted to every individual, considered as being automatically able to read and interpret every aspect of their life. And yet it is true that life speaks – *historia magistra vitæ* – but only if there is a heart that will listen.

In reality, it often ends up, in our formation settings, that we do not systematically put our hand to a formation plan that puts the individual in a position to listen to life in its entirety, or to place his heart in a listening attitude to life and history, a heart that is not only docile, but *docibilis*, capable of recognising God who reveals the singular features of his face in the small and limited measure of the creature's life, of listening to the Word entrusted to it and to no one else, and in which is also hidden the mystery of its own creaturely identity, its own self.¹¹

If formation does not help one to practise this inescapable task of learning how to learn about life and history, it will be a formation that only succeeds in offering a partial ability to become great repeaters of learned notions or transmitters of the experiences of others, and not witnesses of a wisdom matured in one's own days and in one's own flesh.

1.3 Convergence and divergence between approaches... from apparent contradiction to complementarity

The two perspectives, i.e., one of spiritual theology and the other of the pedagogy of formation, with their own emphases and different interests, broadly coincide in this sensitivity to valuing experience, life, and history as theological places and sources of wisdom.

It is on the basis of the human being's experience in Christ that the content of spirituality as well as that of formation is gathered and thematised. The fulcrum of this experience is its intrinsic link with salvation history, oriented towards its fullness in Christ as lived in the Church.

But here, an apparent contradiction arises in the criterion of which experiences to value most. For spiritual theology it is the saints – their experience, life and history – who are the best witnesses of this Christological and ecclesial experience insofar as salvation history reaches its climax in them. The saints can be considered to be the “laboratory” of spiritual theology, the privileged field of research.

The history of Christian spirituality cannot do without the – spiritual references of – models of holiness capable of interpreting an era and becoming a point of reference for every period, indicating certain strengths (= constants) and offering a unified and systematic understanding of the entire experience of faith. The experiences of holiness

¹¹ A. CENCINI, *L'Albero della vita*, 130.

are, by their very nature, theologically eloquent, to the point of becoming theological phenomena.¹²

While the formation sciences do not only refer mainly to the formand's own experience (his life and history) they do insist on transforming *all* these experiences (*all* of life, *all* the history) into a theological place and source of wisdom, and not only those regarded in Christians terms as *the more excellent ones*.

The principal function of formation is to shape a heart open to the Spirit, "...capable of explicitly living faith as a source of meaning, as a criterion for interpreting experience and what exists, of what one feels in one's heart, what seduces and attracts one, frightens and worries one, but also that part of human experience, past and present, proper to every human being, which is more difficult to accept and which contrasts with the natural need for happiness and human harmony, namely unease, aggression, emptiness, obscurity, self-rejection, suffering, old age, failure, setbacks, change, crisis, death..."¹³ Including evil and sin; just like the other person and including what is common.

And here is the apparent contradiction: spiritual theology focuses on the experience that is "excellent and guaranteed by the Church" while the formation sciences insist on all experiences, and perhaps all the more so on those most disassociated with the vital centre of the person, a centre which for a believer can only be the Paschal Mystery.

But, as the subtitle hints at, the contradiction is only apparent. The experience of the saints is excellent because in one way or another they knew how to accept the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives, recapitulating *everything* in the Son's cross. It is the *docibility* [the ability to be taught] of their heart that is the model for us, rather than the various expressions or results of their spiritual journey.

We consider that the two viewpoints are somewhat complementary. Formation sciences emphasise attention to the past and present of the individual so that *everything* can benefit from the grace of redemption. While spiritual theology emphasises attention to the present and future of the individual by offering pathways and goals that the saints have already experienced throughout the history of the Church.

The problem is posed precisely in the attempt to understand experience *as a whole* or *as a systemic unit*. Human thinking and science can only fragment what is not itself fragmented in reality. In fact, in reality, first there is systemic unity, then comes the understanding of it. In the effort to understand experience *as a whole*, the development of human thinking throughout history has led human beings to specialisation in the study of reality with the aim of achieving a more controlled

¹² J.M. GARCÍA, *Teologia dell'esperienza cristiana – giustificazione epistemologica e interdisciplinarietà*, Rome, 2009, 122.

¹³ A. CENCINI, *L'Albero della vita*, 130-131.

understanding of the data studied. But scientific specialisation does not respond to the reality (which is not broken up into specialised sectors), but responds to a certain condition of limited human intelligence. These are limits that drive us to make scientific choices. The scientist, then, chooses a study sector and a particular perspective according to his scientific *purpose*, and as a consequence excludes the rest. The advantage, as has already been said, is to have a more in-depth knowledge, but the disadvantage is that it is not possible to scientifically grasp complex realities which have elements that have been excluded from the chosen field from the outset, and which cannot be understood from the chosen perspective.

At this point, interdisciplinarity becomes a very important tool because it allows us to grasp several dimensions of the same reality, bringing us closer to understanding it as it is.¹⁴

1.4 Summing up

History is one of the most important teachers of life because the world, humankind, the Church and every individual, and their own histories in relation to this, were created in Christ and in view of him, therefore each of these histories, each at its own level, is originally *destined in Christ* to become *salvation history*.

We are not saying that every history is a history of salvation; we are saying that every history is originally called to become a history of salvation through the action of the Spirit in revelation and its acceptance on the part of human beings, in faith. By creating a very special bond between revelation-faith and history, of asymmetrical reciprocity, history is filled with meaning, becoming *magistra vitae* in its deepest sense.

2. The Salesian Middle East Province (MOR)

Our study is intended to be an exercise in interpreting, in faith, the common history of Salesians in the Middle East, with the hope of helping to deepen our identity and stimulating a similar exercise in the personal history of the Salesians who are members of this Province.

With this re-reading from a faith perspective, we seek to offer a concrete contribution to the inescapable need for the confreres of MOR (present and future generations) to grow in their Provincial identity and to make a courageous effort in the task of inculturation of the charism:

I insist on this last point: you are not asked to carry out a generic pastoral work, but to *embody the Salesian charism in this (Middle) Eastern land*. You therefore need to

¹⁴ J.M. GARCÍA, *Teologia dell'esperienza*, 119.

compare yourselves with the sources, set in motion systematic paths of formation for all the confreres in the light of what the Congregation has said and is saying today.¹⁵

2.1 Description of the Province

The Salesian Middle East Province, among all the provinces in the Salesian world, is certainly the one that has the greatest variety of peoples, languages and religions, spread as it is across three continents (Europe, Asia, Africa) and seven countries: Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Iran. It is not far from the truth that this is currently the most complex province in the Congregation of the sons of Don Bosco.

The total number of confreres is 107,¹⁶ of whom: 86 are priest confreres with perpetual vows, 9 nine are brothers with perpetual vows and 12 are confreres in initial formation. There are 34 local confreres and 73 missionaries. The confreres belong to 22 different nationalities, of which the largest groups are from: Italy (46), Syria (14), Egypt (13), Poland (6), India and Lebanon (4).

2.1.1 The wealth of the Province

The Middle East Province represents the Salesian Congregation in the places that witnessed the human story of the Son of God, the first spread of evangelical preaching, the birth and spread of the first Christian communities, the flourishing of the Church according to the different rites.

The Province has almost 120 years of history (1891–2011) which has seen so many Salesians clearly placed on the frontier of the young and in particular the poorest.

Certainly the greatest wealth to rely on has been and continues to be the confreres.

Many of them are missionaries who have demonstrated the inner attitude of those who are ready to “leave” their lives behind (*coetera tolle*) to give it to those to whom God sends them (*da mihi animas*).

Others are local confreres who have been seduced by God and Don Bosco’s charism, and have enriched it with personal gifts and the cultural and religious background of the East, their Churches, theologies and spiritualities.

¹⁵ P. CHAVEZ, *Rector Major’s letter at the conclusion of the Extraordinary Visitation*, 29.06.2004, 3.

¹⁶ Of these, 93 are incardinated in MOR while a further 14 are temporarily in the Province. There are 4 confreres in a particular situation and 7 temporarily inscribed in other Provinces.

Thanks to the generous gift the confreres have made of themselves, the works are very much appreciated by civil and ecclesiastical authorities,¹⁷ as well as the thousands of people who are the beneficiaries of the services provided.

The history of this land is a history of holiness. In the Salesian Family, too, there have been abundant fruits of holiness, among whom the Venerable Simon Srugi (Salesian Brother from Nazareth) and the Servant of God Mathilde Salem (Salesian Cooperator from Aleppo) stand out. Alongside them were many other confreres, particularly brothers, who in humility and total dedication lived their religious consecration in the service of young people.

2.1.2 Difficulties in the life of the Province

There is no lack of political difficulties in the Middle East¹⁸ as well as economic ones.¹⁹ We do not know how long individual situations will last, but it is clear that the effects will last for many years and some will not be reversible, such as the Islamisation of Lebanon and Palestine due to the flight of Catholics.

At the level of management of the Province's personnel, the political mosaic of which it is composed causes a series of difficulties for the exchange of confreres (including them knowing one another) as well as the problems of sending the most suitable personnel to the different locations. Added to this is the challenge of learning the different languages (or translating the charismatically fundamental texts into them), but also of adapting to the diversity of cultures (or situations) while maintaining charismatic fidelity.

In circumstances like these, not only pastoral coordination or common planning become very difficult but especially creating a sense of belonging and Provincial identity. It is difficult to create an identity in a context that tends to be dispersed, marked by great geographical, political, cultural and ecclesial distances.

¹⁷ It is appropriate to note that the Province has to maintain relationships with 6 Patriarchs, and the same number of Nuncios or Apostolic Delegates, and with 18 bishops.

¹⁸ One thinks of the harsh conflict between the State of Israel and the situation of Palestinians; the serious tensions between Israel and the various Arab countries; the recent war against Iraq, which has exacerbated relations with the Western world; the exasperation of radical Islam (Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood); the conflicts in Lebanon; the tough stance of confrontation on the part of Iran; the failure to resolve certain problems related to ethnic minorities.

¹⁹ The situation of political instability and the constant threat of war do not allow for a secure development of local economies. The great source of wealth from oil is controlled by the rulers, but they fail to channel it into significant measures to improve social and economic conditions. Conditions of poverty are especially marked within the Arab peoples. Young people are often discouraged by the lack of any real future prospects.

2.1.3 The most important challenges

Among the priority challenges, we can see one basic one: The Lord calls us to consolidate our charismatic identity, making a serious effort at inculturation, strengthening the sense of belonging to the Provincial community.

This demands:

On the one hand, the constant care of one's own Salesian identity, through prayer, love for Don Bosco, a sense of belonging to the Congregation, study and reflection on today's Salesian "magisterium" (Constitutions, Acts of the General Chapters, Letters of the Rector Major, Guidelines of the Congregation's Sectors/Departments).

On the other hand, a great love for the people entrusted by God to us as beneficiaries, striving to know more and more about their history, their language, their culture, their faith (one cannot continue to remain a "foreigner" because of the lifestyle or language habitually used in community or in prayer).

There is also need for a great love for the Provincial community, knowing that we are not free agents but members of a community where we can express fraternal and apostolic communion. If distances are an objective obstacle to growing in this sensitivity, it only means that we must make a greater effort to open our minds and hearts to communion, which will save the individual confreres from emotional solitude and from those forms of a gradual "fading" of our identity as consecrated individuals which are, especially in the Eastern context, a clear form of counter-witness which does not attract, but repels potential vocations.

2.2 Summing up

After 120 years of history, the Salesian Middle East Province is the heir and custodian of many riches and resources; but it is also very much tried by the difficult political, economic, social, religious and ecclesial situations of the countries in which it lives and works.

Today it feels particularly called to face the challenge of consolidating its Salesian charismatic identity, making a serious effort at inculturation, strengthening in the confreres the sense of belonging to the Provincial community.

From what has been said above, we can consider an effort to have an interpretation of our history in the light of faith as a precious and timely gift, in order to re-appropriate the past (convinced that God has acted in it), to understand ourselves better in the present by facing the current situation as a time of grace, and finally to open our memory, reason and will to the action of the Spirit that will continue to guide the province in the future.

3. Called to live in community (1st choice)

It would be an interesting and a very valuable endeavour to carry out this spiritual interpretation of the entire history of the Province; it would offer us a true and complete common heritage, as well as a vision (including theological) of the whole course of events. But of course, the broader and more complex the scope for analysis the more it presumes a serious study of the various components or stages, if one does not want to make a superficial interpretation that generates conclusions that have little to do with historical reality. In our concrete case, there are no conditions for embarking on such an undertaking.

Another option would be to concentrate on the biographical or hagiographical side; to focus on the life of an exemplary or important confrere in the history of the province, and this would be all the more theologically significant if this confrere's cause of beatification is underway. In itself this would be a good contribution. The danger that could arise is to remain within a perspective that is too particular and linked to the personality and gifts of nature and grace of a single person. Our proposal, which lies halfway between the two possibilities mentioned, is to concentrate on the history of a community. Of course, this choice does not automatically overcome any of the dangers: it can continue to be a very abundant field of investigation with the danger of making a superficial interpretation, and at the same time a very partial view of things, all the more so if we consider the distances (geographical, political, social, economic, historical, ecclesial, pastoral, vocational) that separate one community from another in the Province of the Middle East.

There are various reasons which urge me to make a choice like this:

A charismatic reason: if living and working together is a fundamental and secure need for the Salesians to realise their vocation,²⁰ then a meditation on their history that wishes to deepen their vocational identity should see them as follows: in community.

A reason of coherence: because what is desired is precisely to recover the value of the "whole" of community life. In fact, because of the sense of Provincial belonging which we want to help strengthen, the historical and spiritual heritage of a community is everyone's heritage.

A reason of planning: if we want to arrive at redeeming the historical and spiritual heritage of an entire Province in memory, the study of one community is not an insignificant contribution (it would be the history of one out of thirteen communities currently erected).

²⁰ Cf. C 49.

And now the spontaneous question: which community should we carry out the study on?

4. The Beitgemal community (2nd choice)

While it is true that each of the Salesian presences in the Province, even those that have been closed or suspended, are a heritage worthy of historical and spiritual study, there are several reasons that lead me to choose the community at Beitgemal:

The Church and the members of the Province recognise in the *Salesian Brother, Simon Srugi*, the confrere who, by allowing himself to be guided by the action of the Spirit, has responded most generously, faithfully and perseveringly to the call to be permanently configured to the mind of Christ. This confrere, a most precious gift of God to MOR and to the entire Salesian family, lived the entirety of his consecrated life, almost 50 years, in Beitgemal. This is the fundamental reason that prompted me to choose this community.

Beitgemal is one of the works *founded by Canon Antonio Belloni* before the actual arrival of the Salesians. Hence, Beitgemal is one of the three communities, together with Bethlehem and Cremisan, that have existed since the beginning of the Province's history; hence it is part of the 120 years of Salesian presence.

Beitgemal is the only Salesian community that enjoys the good fortune of being custodian of a “*holy place*” or one otherwise related to New Testament characters. This gift demands considerable responsibility, but perhaps the main one should be spiritual growth in line with the memory that we are called to safeguard and bear witness to.

It is well known that the history of Beitgemal is not only linked to the founder of the Province, Fr Bellone, and the figure of Simon Srugi, but also includes the presence of *exemplary Salesians* like Fr Eugenio Bianchi (a great formator and “holy” confrere) and Fr Mario Rosin (killed in circumstances very much akin to martyrdom).

An ecclesiastical arbitration is currently underway to define the ownership of the material assets that once belonged to Fr Antonio Belloni, then Canon of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, who became a Salesian and passed on the administration of all his possessions to the Congregation of the Sons of Don Bosco. This arbitration is peculiar to the community of Beitgemal. The point is that whatever the outcome, the work will have to suffer a turning point. So it seems, whatever the outcome, that it is the most opportune moment to gather in memory all that God has raised up on this land which was the property of Gamaliel, the site of the tomb of St Stephen the Martyr, and to which Blessed Michael Rua gave the nickname “house of charity”.

5. The period from 1891–1958 (3rd choice)

Although we will be offering a summary of the chronicles of the community over its 120 years, as well as statistical data on the Salesians who lived there throughout this period, it seems more appropriate to restrict the study to the first half of the community's life.

This first segment can be demarcated from the foundation of the work until the first closure of the orphanage in 1958 as a consequence of the drastic decrease in pupils and the prevailing insecurity after the 1948 war.

The period chosen largely coincides with that of the life and work of Simon Srugi, who lived in Beitgemal first as an aspirant, a novice and then as a Salesian from 1892 until his death in 1943. But it continues until the two events that greatly influenced his memory: in 1948 when the Muslim population, to whom he dedicated his service as a nurse and miller, were driven out of their lands and had to flee; and then in 1958 when the orphanage to which he dedicated his life was closed.

Chapter Two

The Beitgemal Community 1891–1958

*“We have heard with our ears,
O our ancestors have told us what deeds
you performed in their days,
in the days of old:
You with your hands, drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free;
for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory,
but your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them”
(Ps 43[44]).*

The Salesian community at Beitgemal, in a pleasant location situated on the top of a hill thirty kilometres west of Jerusalem,²¹ stands in the middle of an extensive parcel of land of about 400 hectares.

As far as we know, *Beitgemal* can be identified with the ancient Christian village of *Kfargamla*,²² a village that arose in direct connection with *Gamalel's country estate*. He was the great doctor of the law mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.²³

²¹ Lat. N. 31°43'28" – Log. E. Greenwich 34°58'49"; alt. 320 m.

²² “Beit” meaning house in Hebrew and Arabic, and “kfar” meaning “village, settlement”.

²³ Acts 5:34-42

In order to get closer to the life of the community at Beitgemal, we will begin with an historical timeline involving the terms of its Rectors, followed by a summary of the life and presence of the confreres in the community (clerics, brothers, priests, sick and elderly confreres). We will then look at one of the most important community problems which has gone down in history as “the takeover of the Arab confreres”, and finally a biographical presentation of the most important figures among the confreres who lived in the community.

1. A history of the community²⁴

The foundation of the Beitgemal house dates back to 1879, when the venerable Canon Antonio Belloni, after opening a Catholic orphanage in Bethlehem, decided to buy this vast agricultural property²⁵ that he intended to be a branch of Bethlehem.

In founding Beitgemal, Fr Belloni had a precise and determined aim: to start an agricultural school in order to extend his charitable work to a larger number of orphans. He was encouraged to do this by Beitgemal’s great benefactor, the newly converted English Catholic Marquis Lord Bute, who, in handing him a large sum of money, told him: “Buy more land with this money and build your agricultural school. Your project is very good, try to realise it as soon as possible; Palestine is essentially an agricultural country and needs intelligent and capable farmers.”²⁶

Fr Belloni relied on the production of vines, olives and cereals to maintain and develop not only the agricultural school but also the orphanage opened in Bethlehem.

A third aim of Fr Belloni’s in buying Beitgemal was to return the place to Christian worship, as even then a widespread tradition identified Beitgemal with the ancient Kafargamala where the tomb of St Stephen was supposedly located.

In fact Beitgemal was successively, as far as we know:²⁷

a. Kfargamla: the villa of Gamaliel, the great doctor of law, teacher of Saul (St Paul) and Stephen (St Stephen the Martyr).

b. Kafargamala: Christian parish where the fabulous discovery of the sepulchre of St Stephen the Martyr, Gamaliel, Nicodemus and Abibos took place in the 5th century.

²⁴ The data for this number comes from archival sources (Beitgemal Community Archive: ACB), specifically from the chronicles which consist of: 32 notebooks of detailed chronicles and 4 of summaries of certain periods.

²⁵ The vast tracts of land that made up the Beitgemal estate were acquired over the course of ten years (1869–1879), little by little, and as donations from benefactors flowed in. In the end, he succeeded in appropriating land of about 600 hectares.

²⁶ *Cronaca* 1869, in ACB, 1869.

²⁷ Cf. *Lucian’s Letter*. Appendix No. 1.

It is known that in 415 A.D. a certain priest named Lucianos, the Greek “parish priest” of a village in Palestine called Kafargamala, sent a letter to the Eastern and Western Churches in which he joyfully announced the discovery of the tomb of the protomartyr Stephen, together with that of Nicodemus,²⁸ Rabbi Gamaliel, influential member of the Sanhedrin and uncle of Nicodemus,²⁹ and the tomb of one of his sons, Abibos.

In 614 Persians from Cosroe destroyed all the churches in Palestine, from the largest to the smallest, except for the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The church at Kafargamala too was destroyed, and like so many other historical or biblical sites from the Old and New Testament, their memory was lost.³⁰

c. Beitgemal: a Muslim village.

In 1869 when Fr Belloni made the first purchases in Beitgemal, the village, decimated over time by malaria, was reduced to a few habitations and even fewer inhabitants. These few survivors of the miserable village had the desire to get rid of the place, even at a low price.

Fr Belloni immediately and tirelessly took care of the reorganisation, enhancement and administration of the farm, which was in a very poor state.³¹ In those early years, a new farming establishment was formed, consisting of a small Christian population of half a dozen orphans, a few people working in the countryside and building the structure, and some foreigners. Fr Belloni provided for their spiritual needs.³²

The agricultural school officially opened on 10 December 1878, with few resources, as is usually the case with God’s works. Fr Belloni himself wrote to his benefactors:

After a thousand efforts I finally opened this much desired school on “10 December 1878”. It began modestly: three Daughters of Mary to govern the house, laundry, infirmary; fifteen pupils and some subordinate employees. Our house was only 14 metres wide and 18 metres long. Unexpected help allowed me to continue the work, so that now we have a house 30 metres long by 14 metres wide, consisting of two floors. When the work is finished, we will be able to accommodate 30 children as well as the administrative staff.³³

²⁸ Cf. *Jn* 3.

²⁹ *Acts* 5:34-39.

³⁰ Bearing in mind that the Persian then Muslim invasions go back to the 7th century, it is not possible to know with certainty how long the village remained Christian. There are hypotheses that the expulsion of the Christians took place at the end of the 18th century.

³¹ Using the services of a man he trusted, called Giuseppe Rabaoli.

³² He established Beitgemal as the residence of a Maronite priest, John Tarad. However, the desired agricultural school was not established. Rather than in the fields and agricultural subjects, the few young men who were housed there spent their time learning how to make mother-of-pearl rosary beads. At that time, the industry of making rosary beads and other objects of piety was beginning in Palestine.

³³ A. BELLONI, *Relazione annuale ai benefattori 1880*, in AIMOR, 1880.

The institute was called St Joseph's and a statue of him was purchased for the chapel from 1873.

As early as July 1878, Fr Guglielmo Barberis, an Italian priest belonging to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, had taken over the running of the house and the whole business, under the direction of Fr Belloni, who ordinarily lived at the orphanage in Bethlehem. Fr Barberis was a capable, active man and an architect. He held his office for about 4 years.³⁴

Other than the three Daughters of Mary,³⁵ Fr Belloni was assisted by two Maronite priests, one other priest, and from 1881 two school teachers.

During these years, many construction and renovation works were carried out.³⁶ Ceremonies in the chapel were brightened up with a harmonium, and to encourage them to work well, a large picture of St Isidore the Farmer, was placed where the young student farmers in school could see it.

Some of these pupils were also employed as bricklayers' assistants and given a small stipend. Already in 1881 there were 26 young people and they spent the September, October and November holidays in Bethlehem around Canon Belloni. In 1885, however, when there were 48 boys, they continued to go to Bethlehem for their August and September holidays, swapping places with orphans from Bethlehem.

After a brief period during which Fr Belloni was forced to personally take up the administration, Fr Antonio Scanzio, a native of Biella, arrived. It was with great satisfaction that he managed the school for about 9 years, until May 1891.

During those years many construction works were begun,³⁷ thanks always to the help of generous benefactors. In addition to the Sisters and some lay staff, two Lay Brothers from the Holy Family Work, founded by Fr Belloni, worked closely with Fr Antonio Scanzio.

From the financial records of the time, it can be seen that the pupils of the school were given a modest payment for their work, so that they would find it easier to meet the initial needs of the new life they were about to embark on. In those years the number of

³⁴ At the end of March 1881 the Fr Barberis's term of office ended and he returned to the clergy of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. We do not know the reasons for his withdrawal from Canon Belloni's work. Under the Patriarch, Archbishop Piavi, he became Chancellor of the Curia. He died in 1905 at the age of 52.

³⁵ An Italian institute founded by a Fr Giacinto.

³⁶ Completion of the main building, erection of the entrance gate, foundations of the stable, the well at Wadi Bulos, installation of the oven, construction of a new house at the Fatir garden.

³⁷ The henhouse, the pigsty, the dovecote, the laundry, the cobblestone stable, the cemetery, dwellings for the settlers, a house in Wadi Bulos, roads in the countryside, a small bridge, the courtyard, the Daughters' house, a large cistern, the sacristy, etc.

pupils reached fifty, all of whom were received into the school free of charge, educated, instructed, fed and clothed.

Beitgemal also functioned as a parish of the Latin Patriarchate for Catholics scattered around the countryside.³⁸

In June 1891 Fr Scanzio passed on the leadership to Fr Raffaele Pinperni.³⁹ His term of office was short-lived.

From there on, with the opening of the Salesian community at Beitgemal, we continue this history with reference to the terms of office of the various Salesian Rectors.

1.1 *Varaia Antonio (1892–1894)*

(9 sdb, 5 fma, 4 “*famigli*” or domestics,⁴⁰ 33 pupils)

At the beginning of January 1892 Fr Varaia arrived as the first Salesian Rector of Beitgemal, helped by 2 clerics and 6 brothers.

Fr Varaia was a man of piety and constant vigilance. He took great care to see to frequent reception of the sacraments and the decorum of worship. In the village of Rafat, about 6 kilometres away, there were some twenty or so Catholics who took advantage of Beitgemal for their religious practices and a Salesian often went to the village to meet their spiritual needs.

Fr Varaia was not able to do as much as he wished in the development of the farm and the business, but he always kept to the guidelines that Fr Belloni had laid down, preserving the various sections as best he could.

An illustrious visit in that first period was the arrival of Msgr Apodia, Vicar of the Patriarch. On that occasion there was a good number of confirmations of children and adults.

³⁸ Over that time 17 baptisms were administered, while 7 people were laid to rest in the cemetery.

³⁹ Fr Rafael Pinperni, with commendations from the Patriarch, Propaganda and the Holy See, had been an apostolic missionary for about 10 years, especially in the diocese of Mexico, collecting abundant spiritual fruits from souls, as well as abundant alms for Fr Belloni’s work, for which he was the most valid financial support. But once he had handed it over to the Salesians in January 1892, he went to Italy, and having become a Salesian, was sent back to America by his superiors, first to Mexico and then to San Francisco in California as parish priest of the Italian church there.

⁴⁰ *Famigli*: a term used by the Salesians in the early days to refer to the lay people (workers or collaborators) who lived in the community structure and were practically part of it). “Domestics” might be the best English equivalent, even though sometimes there were both “*famigli*” and domestics, one group, the former, living in.

1.2 *Ruggero Corradin (1894–1896)*

(9 sdb, 5 fma, 4 domestics, 35 pupils)

Fr Ruggero immediately showed that he was someone very active. He continued to develop the business side of things on all fronts (with financial aid from Fr Rua, Fr Belloni, etc). A number of legal issues with immediate neighbours began.

A good speaker with a Roman accent, his preaching and language were found to be very pleasing.

One important event was the visit by Fr Rua accompanied by Fr Albera and the Marquis of Villeneuve in 1895. Fr Rua left many written prescriptions for the good management of the farm, and the Marquis donated a press and an oil mill.

We also find that in this period some 26500 square metres of vineyard were planted. The erection of the Lourdes grotto in the courtyard of the house, which was blessed by Fr Rua himself, is worth remembering.

The superiors called Fr Corradin to Turin in October 1896.

1.3 *Cartoni Ercoli Luigi (1895–1901)*

(11 sdb, 5 fma, 5 domestics, 35 pupils)

Fr Cartoni inherited a small community where, at the beginning, he was the only priest. There was plenty of work, hands were few and the financial situation not good.⁴¹ Given the impossibility of managing the lands, in primis he began to lease it out to others.

He gave thought to divine worship: he decorated the shabby chapel, made a new altar, confessional and choir stalls; he bought three statues: Mary Help of Christians, St Joseph and St Aloysius and provided abundant sacred furnishings.

Fr Cantoni was able to bring the “*cuscian*” affair to a conclusion, or in other words the property titles divided into pieces as there were former owners, which was a long and costly affair due to the necessary gratuities or formalities.

In 1899 he returned from Turin with confrere Scavini bringing 19 musical instruments to set up a band. Meanwhile, 7,500 feet of French vines and several hundred almond and carob trees were planted in the countryside. In his chronicle notes Fr Cartoni recorded: 25 conversions (abjurations) of young Greeks who became Catholics, two young men sent to the novitiate in Cremisano⁴² and the perpetual profession of Simon Srugi.

⁴¹ 43,000 francs in debt.

⁴² John Morosini and Rumman Spiridione.

At the end of his term of office in 1901, he was replaced for a few months by Vincenzo Ponzo.

1.4 Vercauteren Carlo (1902–1907)

(10 sdb, 5 fma, 7 domestics, 33 pupils)

It seems that Fr Vercauteren found Beitgemal in a rather critical situation due to the lack of agricultural income because of the general lease of land to John Bader for the insignificant sum of one thousand lire per year.

We have no information about this period. The few records are on the improvement of the business side of things. There is a list of 15 project works that he carried out. Here too, it seems, he left the school in a better state than he found it.

In April 1908 there was a second visit by Fr Rua accompanied by the Provincial, Fr Cardano. On this occasion also, several instructions were issued to the Rector and the Provincial.

1.5 Gianine Isacco (1908–1914)

(14 sdb, 7 fma, 1 domestic, 30 pupils)

From the few interrupted chronicle notes written at that time, it is clear that during his six year term, Fr Isaac Gianine was committed to cultivating the spirit of piety, with frequent confession and Communion, triduums, novenas, etc., as well as zeal and decorum on feast days and solemnities.

The community provided an almost regular service to Rafat, going there for Mass and confessions.

The school was given attention and weekly and monthly marks assigned.⁴³ There was no lack of academies, theatre etc... But the importance given to study was to the detriment of work and the farm business which was increasingly dilapidated.

In fact, the boys had no more than two and a half hours of work a day, including the round trip, and many were exempt for one reason or another. Ownership problems resumed, this time (1908–1912) the quarrel was with the Scerif and the Italian embassy had to intervene. In 1912, the tensions of the Italo-Turkish war were beginning to be felt, but apparently there were no major problems.

⁴³ You can still see the excellently kept records. Cf. *Registri scolastici 1908-1914*, in ACB.

It needs to be noted that during 1913 and 1914, Fr Eugenio Bianchi and Fr Alfredo Sacchetti, invited by the Superior Chapter with wide powers, introduced various reforms (the first being the school timetable) and carried out a lot of work. In April 1913 they sent a report to the Superior Chapter, here is the general judgement:

The Beitgemal Farm has been in a period of increasing decay for several years. (...) This is not a criticism either of the present staff or of past administrations; it is simply a statement of fact. Certainly, no Rector has ever lacked the will to do good; indeed, we must acknowledge the fine initiatives of some and the administrative skills of others.

What Beitgemal lacked was an initial technical directive and a work plan to be followed by all the administrations. Beitgemal has been a real field of experience in which the skills and personal initiative of many have been unleashed, leading to heavy expenditure, which is not always remunerative and in many cases unnecessary; and each change of personnel, which is unfortunately very frequent, has seen the introduction of radical reforms and the adoption of diametrically opposed systems to those previously used. And so we see how some productive activities were abandoned (...); some cultivated Beitgemal under the farm system, and some under the lease system; some adopted a mixed system, and others eliminated the farmers. There were those who planted (...); but there were those who not only abandoned plantations, but also destroyed them; those in favour of arboriculture were succeeded by those who thought differently and destroyed the trees, and if some thought of reforming the forests and increasing the olive groves with nurseries and new plantations, there were those who devastated everything, allowing hundreds and hundreds of goats to graze freely...

It is therefore not surprising that Beitgemal's income has always been very limited, minimal compared to the capital invested, and that the farm is in an increasingly dilapidated state.⁴⁴

It continues, with a report on the "current state of the various income-providing activities", subdivided into three parts: "I. Buildings and construction",⁴⁵ "II. Agricultural capital"⁴⁶ and "III. Cultivation and lands".⁴⁷ They then offered 5 guidelines for a plan to be carried out over time.

The plan was approved by the Superior Chapter.⁴⁸ The then Rector Major, Fr Albera, communicated to the Provincial that the plan presented could not be modified either by future Rectors or Provincials without special permission from the Superior Chapter.

⁴⁴ *Lettera sullo stato della Colonia Agricola di Beitgemal inviata da don Eugenio Bianchi e Alfredo Sacchetti al Capitolo Superiore dei Salesiani*, in ACB, April 1913.

⁴⁵ House, stables, wine cellar, mill, thyme distillery, oil mill, granaries and storerooms.

⁴⁶ Livestock, equipment.

⁴⁷ Olive grove, vineyard, valleys.

⁴⁸ This included the sale of the Deiraban land for the sum of F. 27,000, which would serve as capital for the costs of the reform. Here the land was reduced for the first time, from almost 600 hectares to 500.

Fr Isaac Gianine finished his term of office in September 1914. At this point the Chronicle suggests:

General overview of the arrival of the Salesians 1892–1914.⁴⁹

Rectors 5,
Professed confreres⁵⁰ varying from 6 to 14 Sisters M.A. from 5 to 7
Domestics living in the house from 4 to 8
Boys taken in, maintained and educated, around 400
Abjurations of young Greeks 70
Vocations 7 (Fr. Auad, Fr. Sciunnar, Fr. Salman, Fr. Spiridion, Hauile, Morosini, Srugi)
Baptisms 23
Confirmations 28
Easter communions. 80
Sunday communions 45
Daily communions from 25 to 35
Weddings 6
Burials 17

1.6 Bianchi Eugenio (1914–1926)

(12 sdb, from 6 to 0 then again 5 fma, 14 domestics including those living in, 40 pupils)

Fr Bianchi began as Rector in September 1914. It was a difficult time. World War I broke out in August. It was necessary to suspend all non-agricultural work and just solve the problem of existence.

Until Italy entered the war, there were no major difficulties or harassment. Therefore it was decided to start school in mid-October 1914 with 38 pupils. The school was reorganised as an agricultural school of the first grade and five hours of work were introduced in two parts, morning and evening, for all young people without exception.

Early in 1915 circumstances meant the FMA left for Italy and Alexandria.⁵¹ Towards early August the Rector Major, Fr Albera, ordered Italian Salesians to leave Palestine for Alexandria, but the Turkish government, having given them all their passports and when they were already in Jaffa, refused to allow them to embark.⁵²

From this month of August 1915 until 17 November 1917, the day on which the Turkish troops abandoned Beitgemal, it was an interminable series of events, of difficulties, of struggles to save the people and the structure from Turkish rapacity. We succeeded to a great extent, and the help of God and Mary Help of Christians was

⁵⁰ The number of confreres, sisters and domestics is for each year. The rest make up the sum total.

⁵¹ The Italian Consul foresaw that Italy too would soon enter the war and hastily ordered their departure.

⁵² Italy had already declared war on Austria and on 23 August went to war with the Turks.

visible. During this period, in spite of many requisitions, thefts and arbitrary taxes, Beitgemal was able to support not only its own staff and pupils, but also those of other houses in Palestine, including the young people from the Bethlehem Orphanage who took refuge here in 1916.⁵³

On 23 August 1915, while the Italian Salesians were in *Jaffa* and prevented from leaving for Alexandria, the Turkish army invaded Beitgemal, and under armed escort all the local staff and young people set off for Ramleh and remained prisoners for several days. In the meantime, a real plundering took place, and when the Salesians returned by order of the Jerusalem authorities, they found money, furniture, cereals, animals, etc. missing.

Despite frequent abuses of authority by the Turkish government and military, the school year began regularly in October 1915. That year, the young people impressed by the events behaved very well.

In January 1916, Fr Sacchetti, fed up with the constant violence, managed, with perseverance and much effort, to obtain a charter from the military governor stating that no one had the right to commit abuses and arbitrariness in a charitable institution such as Beitgemal. This written charter was very useful in silencing and even encouraging some ill-intentioned people to leave.

In June 1916, the orphanage in Bethlehem having been occupied by Turkish troops, Beitgemal welcomed 10 confreres and 20 pupils. The refectories were converted into dormitories and the sisters' premises were used for the rest. In all there were 59 young people and 34 Salesians and domestics.

But the abuses gradually started up once again, the most serious being the cutting down of the small forest to provide wood for the railways. And the worst came on 27 August when the police took all the pupils away to the Turkish orphanage in Jerusalem, and with them came school furniture, beds, machines, tools, school supplies, livestock, cereals, food, etc. A good handful of pupils managed to escape during the move. A small group of pupils managed to escape on the journey.

And amidst many calamities a ray of sunshine. In September 1915, a segment of mosaic was found while the boys' courtyard was being extended. This is how the Dominican Maurice Gisler came to be called. Here is how the chronicle describes it:

24 September 1915. Fr Maurizio Gisler arrives with Fr Eigman. He wanted to see the mosaic found in the boys' courtyard. Excavations began with much enthusiasm, and having discovered the mosaic in one of the places already known, namely to the left of the latrines, it is a true masterpiece of art. They proceeded further and found

⁵³ *Riassunto Cronaca Beitgemal 1915-1917*, in ACB, 1915-1917.

the bases of several columns which gave the dimension of a side aisle. The *Diaconicon* and signs of a central nave and apse were later found. The wonder, not to say emotion, reached its peak when under the mosaic a beautiful tomb with a staircase cut into the rock was discovered. The priest made a survey of everything and then covered up the excavations so as not to attract attention. He promised to make a conscientious study, expressing the conviction that we were in the presence of the primitive sepulchre of St Stephen the Protomartyr.⁵⁴

New orphans arrived, along with those who fled from the Turks and some who continued to flee.⁵⁵ But Turkish arbitrariness was never lacking either. To give just one example: in 1916, the Turkish government harvested the olives and took all the produce, but the best part came in February 1917 when they wanted to force people to pay a tithe, as a tax to the state, of that harvest...

In the meantime, the Patriarch and Rector Major intervened on the issues of rites, the Arabic catechism and freedom of confession.⁵⁶

In May, 12 confreres from Cremisan were transferred to Beitgemal. We read in a note following this:

The year is not good for agriculture, We have no threshing machine or livestock, the mill works very little because there is no money. Our situation is rather critical due to the increase in personnel, but there is no shortage of necessities and the help of Providence is tangible.⁵⁷

In July, confrere Bormida was put in charge of reproducing the mosaic that was discovered and did so with love and skill. While doing this work he discovered the mutilated inscription corresponding to the centre of the church. Two weeks later, Fr Gisler wrote to the Rector congratulating him for Bormida's work and declaring that the issue of Capergamala could be resolved in favour of Beitgemal.

But on 3 September Bormida was arrested by the police and taken to Bethlehem. The houses of Bethlehem, Cremisan and Beitgemal were isolated and, in the meantime, meticulous searches were carried out. They wanted at all costs to find traces of a wireless telegraph of which Bormida was the chief operator. Bormida was taken to the prison in Jerusalem and then condemned to exile because he had confessed that before the war he had been conducting simple school experiments in wireless telegraphy.

⁵⁴ *Cronaca* 1915, in ACB, 24 September 1915.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Cronaca* 1916, in ACB, 19 December 1916: The Provincial arrived with young Farid Asaf who broke his leg while escaping from a window of the Turkish orphanage in Jerusalem.

⁵⁶ They asked that the Holy See's decree of 5 March 1913, which clarified all the difficulties in the matter, be followed.

⁵⁷ *Cronaca* 1917, in ACB, 7 June 1917

The most distressing case was that this situation was provoked by a series of accusations against the Italian confreres made by the Arab confreres in Bethlehem before the Turkish authorities.

On 21 September the Governor of Jerusalem called on the Salesians superiors to give account as to: 1. Why Arab Salesians were not allowed to use their mother tongue, 2. Why school was being conducted at Beitgemal without Government permission.

In response, two days later a letter was sent to the Governor, signed by all the Beitgemal staff, Arab and German, proving that the accusations made against the Italian superiors were unfounded.

On 20 October, the Spanish Consul announced that the Governor was not interested in the accusations made against the Italian Salesians, saying that these were internal matters, but the Consul could not save Bormida from being a victim of his own naive sincerity.

On 10 November, the German-Turkish army was seriously defeated, and on 12, 13, 14 and 15 November, the soldiers who had previously come to taunt the community, were now hungry and wounded, begging for help, although there were also those who came with threats. They were all offered bread, olives and plenty of vegetables to eat, and they left more peacefully.

On 16 November a battalion arrived. On the 17th came a visit from about twenty senior Turkish and German officers, They left and several cavalry units arrived. They confronted the British army, but the latter's artillery gave them an advantage over the Turks, who were forced to retreat.

Towards evening, the Rector was told that the troops had withdrawn during the night. The officers, but especially the Commander,⁵⁸ greeted the Salesian community warmly. One of the officers confessed that some hours earlier, the Governor of Jerusalem had telephoned and ordered that the Italian Salesians at Beitgemal be arrested, but that the Commander did not want to do so, saying: "these are people working for humanity. Let's leave them in peace."⁵⁹

But things did not go so well for the other communities. In fact, on 26 November, news arrived that Frs Rosin (Bethlehem Community) and Zanchetta (Cremisan Community) had come to Beitgemal in search of flour (only a critical situation could drive them to such a reckless act in those days) and had been arrested by retreating Turkish soldiers and taken into exile, accused of espionage, for having been found in a

⁵⁸ To whom he had given food and linen.

⁵⁹ *Cronaca* 1917, in ACB, 17 November 1917.

war zone. The other confreres at Cremisan and Bethlehem were arrested on 6 December and deported on the 7th (one day before the British entered Jerusalem).

The news of the confreres' journey into exile was discouraging, and even worse was the confirmation of Bro. Bormida's death in Nablus.

From the beginning of January 1918, work began to reorganise the school, receiving 35 boys, including those who had returned from the Turkish Orphanage.⁶⁰ With much effort, normality was resumed; although now it was the German confreres who were threatened with exile, but the superiors manage to avoid it.

The war left great wounds on the economic level in the Salesian communities of the Holy Land, but the most painful was the division among the confreres. Even if Beitgemal was not the focus of the "question of the Arab confreres", there were repercussions of it there.

1918. The year has been extremely difficult not only for financial reasons but especially for reasons of internal order. The Provincial Fr Sutera and the Rector Fr Bianchi have gone through terrible times. But it is all over. *Deo Gratias!*⁶¹

At the beginning of 1919 there was an extraordinary visitation with full powers by Fr Peter Ricaldone, to deal with "the question of the Arab confreres" and economic problems. For the latter Fr Ricaldone left a precise set of instructions to be followed.

Fr Eugenio Bianchi's second term was marked by a slow economic recovery, by the organised work carried out and also because it enjoyed the goodwill of the British government and some aid from the Italian government.

Much more lively was the resumption of educative and pastoral activities. The school revived very well under Fr Eugenio's leadership. During the six-year period several agricultural competitions were held, obtaining numerous prizes and diplomas. The number of pupils was around 48, each year 7 or 8 received a diploma, and in the last year (1926) certificates were given for specialised courses in grafting and motoculture.

But the brightest aspect was the amazement caused by the re-discovery of the "sepulchre"⁶² of St Stephen. Specialists (Dominicans and Jesuits) had had lively debates on

⁶⁰ A few days after the expulsion of the Turks they went to Latrun with the hope of recovering what had been seized. But the Turk responsible had sent everything away days before and what he could not take away was destroyed.

⁶¹ *Riassunto Cronaca Beitgemal* 1918, in ACB, 1919.

⁶² Today it is known that the crypt thought to be the tomb of St Stephen was in fact no more than a part of Gamaliel's Villa; the real tomb, however, according to archaeological studies by Fr Andrea Strus, is in the grounds of Beitgemal a few metres away. In the autumn of 1999, Fr Andrea Strus, a Polish Salesian and professor at the Salesian Pontifical University (UPS) in Rome, who died prematurely in June 2005, began

the issue, but each time the other hypotheses became more obscure, and the identification of Beitgemal with the Kafargamala of Lucian's letter became more convincing.

And so it was that Fr Bianchi, in 1923, proposed founding the "Pious Work of Stephen for spreading Christian forgiveness". Here are the statutes:

Statutes of the Pious Work of St Stephen Protomartyr

At the Sepulchre of St Stephen and Saints Gamaliel, Nicodemus and Abibon, recently discovered in the Catholic Orphanage of Beitgemal (Palestine), the Pious Work of St Stephen is founded in honour of the glorious Protomartyr who heroically imitated the Divine Master in the practice of charity, forgiving his own killers.

Purpose: The aim of the Pious Work is to implore from Saint Stephen, and to spread among the Christian people, the full practice of charity, even towards enemies, to extinguish the flame of hatred still alive in poor humanity, both Christian and unbelievers, becoming a centre of prayers and good works at the very tomb of the Protomartyr. Prayers are said daily by Catholic and schismatic orphans educated in piety and work by the Sons of the venerable D. Bosco; good works benefit them and other Muslim orphans gathered and educated in the same institute.⁶³

Fr Bianchi sent a letter to the Pope dated 20 May, and this was handed over by Fr Sacchetti in a private audience on 2 June. On 9 the Pope, through his Secretary of State, expressed how pleased he was with this initiative, approved and blessed the Work and enriched it with indulgences requested on behalf of members.

On 3 August the Patriarch of Jerusalem also blessed the Association. And from that day on, there was an annual commemoration of the "Work of St Stephen" that took place on 3 August.⁶⁴

Also in 1923, a concrete statue of Mary Help of Christians was donated and placed on top of the tower.

archaeological excavations at a location called Jiljil, also on the Beitgemal estate, about 300 metres from our house.

The remains of a round structure were found, which was ultimately used as a wine press. From the beginning, however, it should not have been so, because the structure was very well executed and with precise Byzantine measurements.

Indeed, Fr Strus believed he had found in this round structure (because Stephen in Greek means crown) the monument that John Bishop of Jerusalem, had had built at Kfargamla to preserve the relics of St Stephen when his body was brought to Jerusalem. Cf. A. STRUS, *Bet gemal: dalle "prime dimore" in Terra Santa agli onori dell'altare nel duomo di Pisa*, Pisa, Pisa, 2004.

⁶³ *Libro di registro della «Pia Opera di Stefano per la diffusione del perdono cristiano»*, in ACB, 1923, 1-2.

⁶⁴ From 1924 to 1954 there were 26,424 enrolments.

1.7 Rosin Mario (1926–1929)

(11 sdb, 5 fma, 4 domestics and teachers, 45 pupils)

In 1926 the Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi, having become aware of the initiative of the Work of St Stephen and the desire to rebuild the ‘*martyrium*’, published the following message:

I praise the proposal... we too must have our Shrine of Saint Stephen in Palestine. It will be dedicated in a special way to Christian Forgiveness. It is my hope that all confreres will contribute to the building of the *Martyrium* by promoting the idea and gathering offerings.⁶⁵

These words contributed greatly to the flow of donations for this purpose. The work proceeded at a good pace. And on 3 August 1928 the crypt was blessed.

For its part, the school received a new impetus with the arrival of Fr Giovanni Fergnani as Prefect of Studies, who promoted school competitions, academies and dramatic performances.

The service offered by the mill, as well as the infirmary, was administered by Bro. Simon Srugi and was appreciated also by the school and nearby communities.

In February 1929, a small printing press arrived. Almost all of the writings on the Stephenine question were published there.

1.8 Villa Giovanni (1929–1931)

(11 sdb, 7 fma, 6 lay people, 41 pupils)

In October 1929 Fr Bianchi underwent a painful operation; it was six months before he could return to the house. In November, the contractor Gaspere Maltese, who was in charge of building the *Martyrium*, left suddenly, leaving the work incomplete and with some debts that were paid by the community *pro bono pacis*.

In January the foundation stone was laid for a clinic and a school for young Muslims of poor families living in Beitgemal. The solemn blessing of the *Martyrium* took place on 3 August 1930 given by Archbishop Barlassina in the presence of representatives from almost all the religious orders.

In December 1930 the St Joseph’s Sodality was established with eleven members chosen by the Rector; the President was Brother Srugi. In the last days of December the

⁶⁵ F. RINALDI, *Le prove indirette a favore del sepolcro di santo Stefano*, in “*Bolletino Salesiano*”, 54 (1930), 6.

community was busy following the illness of Fr Eugenio Bianchi, which resulted in his death on 11th January 1931.

1.9 Sacchetti Alfredo (1931–1937)

(13 sdb, 6 fma, from 8 to 1 lay person, 44 pupils)

Fr Sacchetti began his term of office on 26 August 1931; together with him the community struggled to consolidate a climate of concord and understanding, but this was not always possible.

Fr Sacchetti was famous for his administrative ability, and there were many problems he resolved in a masterful way. Despite this, the house ended up in the red every year as usual.

In the meantime, the school continued its ordinary life: a good educational service, difficulties in agricultural management, progress in the reconstruction of the *Martyrium* of St Stephen, participation in the sacraments was promoted and abjurations were recorded, the house was visited by many people who congratulated it on the beauty of nature and on the charitable service provided there; malaria attacked the Salesians, pupils and peasants.

Gradually, the environment of political tension was worsening, insecurity was growing, economic difficulties were increasing and, unfortunately, so was tension in the community.

1.10 Rosin Mario (1937–1938)

(12 sdb, 6 fma, 2 lay people, 40 pupils, 20 workers)

The financial situation of the work was difficult, in fact the year 1937 ended in a big deficit. The political situation was very delicate: the Arabs demanded independence but the British could grant it to satisfy the Jews.

Even within the community at Beitgemal the political conditions had damaged fraternal relations; if not openly, beneath the ashes, two parties were latent among the confreres.

The apostolic and educational activities were going well (school, catechism, triduum, walks, theatre, work), in spite of the problems that occurring one after the other this year.

Beitgemal was visited many times by thieves (11 times), but also by armed bandits who demanded money and clothes (5 times), by those who out of malice cut down trees in the woods (1 time) and, as if that were not enough, even police patrols visited Beitgemal,

stopping for lunch at the convent's expense (4 times). Then there were the problems of ownership (because of the continuous disputes, including legal ones, with neighbours) and in addition, the presence of Bedouins, not always welcome, on the estate.

The British government, interested in the meteorological study carried out in Beitgemal, installed a direct line telephone to the weather station in Artuf at the end of December 1937.

On 8 May, the brigand Albattat, terror of the districts of Ramleh and Hebron that were not far from Beitgemal, was killed.

On 17 June 4 armed brigands broke into the house: they wanted the Rector. They demanded 100 Palestinian lire; when they didn't get it they slapped Fr Rosin in the face (much to the fright of the young people and the whole house). Taken to the prefect's office, they managed to take whatever was in the drawers: 40 piastres.

On 23 June, the Rector, who was returning from hearing the confessions of young people and the Sisters at Rafat was stoned to death. A great sorrow for all. Circumstances demanded silence on the fact.

1.11 Candiani Antonio (1938–1940)

(13 sdb, 6 fma, 2 lay people, 40 pupils)

Fr Candiani began his term of office by noting the sad state the house had been left in materially, financially and morally.

His account was not consoling: malaria had attacked boys, the sisters, confreres.

HEALTH SITUATION – The whole region of Beitgemal was, is and unfortunately will be a hundred percent infected by malaria! The improvements made by reforestation, and the channelling of water, the cleaning of canals and the preventive treatment of quinine are nothing compared to what is needed to reduce the terrible plague that affects the natives and foreigners living in this area! This year all our young people, all the Confreres and all the Sisters paid their tribute to malaria, reducing their bodies to skeletons and my purse to nothing to pay for doctors and medicines.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Riassunto Cronaca Beitgemal 1939*, in ACB, 30 September 1939. Even if, in principle, what Fr Candiani says is true - there are other documents that confirm what he writes - to honour the truth, two facts must be taken into account. The first is that it was certainly a special year: the area had certainly been malarial for a long time, which is why Fr Belloni managed to buy up the whole of the old Muslim village, and it is certain that the health work had been going on for more than 50 years. They were not "doing things in vain" (as Fr Candiani said). The fact is that that year was exceptional because of the excessive rainfall (with an annual average of 350 mm that year, it reached 673 mm) and the temperature, with very low minimums and very high maximums. The second fact is that Fr Candiani's editorial style is very close to the style of the prophet Jeremiah, and there is no doubt that he had plenty of reasons to complain, but it is also evident - as can be seen in several documents - that he was not ready to manage such a badly affected work.

In November, aircraft strafed the vicinity of the house. Rebel Arabs continued to visit the community from time to time, provoking gunfire with the British. The British made thorough searches of the entire house. The community was often visited by the British during the day, and by Arab rebels at night, and one had to put on a good face for all of them.

The political circumstances were still uncertain, dangerous and very damaging to trade, food transport and the safety of travellers. The economic crisis continued, and heavy rain flooded the fields: in March 1939 there was no flour or wheat to make bread. The leguminous crops were also totally lost due to the excessive rainfall, and then the subsequent drought and squalls. The community got by thanks to wheat and olives, which gave a sufficiently abundant harvest.

Despite all that, the educative and pastoral mission went ahead. The house chronicle records all the typical activities of Salesian education. But apparently the results were not very satisfactory:

SCHOLASTIC SITUATION – Also disastrous. With forty orphans aged 10 to 15 with both obvious and hidden physical and moral defects, some as ignorant of their own language as they are of their own relatives, they cannot render even the minimum required to give them any diploma that would declare them fit for any office. There is too little time to study the three languages of Arabic, English and Italian, and along with at least a smattering of agriculture. Any curriculum, no matter how reduced, would be too difficult for them, given the little or complete lack of basic information needed to enter the Institute.⁶⁷

In fact, Fr Rosin had expressed his concern about the poor result in the catechism exam. A year later, assessing the results of the same exam, Fr Candiani used the expression: “less than mediocre”.

The community division was perhaps the most delicate. It was demarcated by two groups, one the local confreres (at least the majority) and the other the missionaries, or perhaps in this case it would be more correct to say “the foreigners”:

MORAL SITUATION – Unfortunately, I was unable to neutralise the malign influence of the two parties in the House, which is why we suffer greatly from the misunderstandings that are inevitable in a large House like Beitgemal.⁶⁸

In November 1940 Fr Frey (German) was taken away by British police. The Rector managed to get him back a short time later. But again in May 1941 Fr Frey was taken to the Austrian hospice. And between 11th and 12th June all the Italian confreres and sisters

⁶⁷ *Riassunto Cronaca Beitgemal 1939*, in ACB, 30 September 1939.

⁶⁸ *Riassunto Cronaca Beitgemal 1939*, in ACB, 30 September 1939.

were arrested and taken to Bethlehem, leaving two confreres in the house to stay with the young people.⁶⁹

At this point the chronicle says:

“NB: From 13 June to 31 October 1940 no chronicle can be found in the house because of the war and internment of the confreres. (During Fr Calis’s term of office).”

1.12 López Rafael Arturo (1940–1943)

(5 sdb, 0 fma, 30 pupils)

Fr López arrived in November 1940. During this three-year period the number of confreres was somewhat variable, Salesians coming and going; one can see that the Provincial did all he could to respond to the different needs of the communities, with the few confreres free. In fact they tried to offer a home and school to the group of orphans entrusted to them by the Lord despite malaria and the war. During these years, in addition to the visits of British police and soldiers, there were frequent visits from Polish soldiers and occasionally from Swiss soldiers.

In April 1941, police investigated Bro. George Haruni and some workers for weapons. They found old weapons and ammunition at Bro. Haruni’s place. In August, after the court verdict, a large sum had to be paid to have him freed.

In June 1942 Polish soldiers insisted on turning Beitgemal into a school for themselves. In the end, they carried out a lot of military manoeuvres on the estate, but they did not manage to take over the school building, as was feared. The drawback was that they often invited themselves to lunch or dinner.

In February 1943 they some of the Italians were released and Fr Candiani returned to the community. After a few months, June 1943, a short respite: Fr Botto, Fr Frey, Bro. Milani and Bro. Fusi were released... but taken back in August.

In the meantime, a lot of energy had to be invested in trying to resolve the legal problems of ownership: neighbours in the village of Zachariah claimed that the area was theirs, but in fact the community had entrusted them with this farmland for them to use.

In July 1943 the Rector was brought to Bethlehem due to illness, and would die there on 8 October.

⁶⁹ The reference is to George Haruni (Lebanese), Roumman Spiridione (Lebanese), because Bro. Milani (Syrian) and Bro. Simon Srugi (Palestinian) were arrested just the same. Srugi was set free just a fortnight later when the Turks were convinced that he was a Palestinian.

1.13 Laiolo Luigi (1943–1946)

(There is no data on the members of the community during this troubled period.)

Once the sisters and some of the confreres had been released, the work could resume its normal rhythm. That is, with the normality that wartime permits. In fact, the military manoeuvres around the house continued.

On 27 November 1943 Bro. Srugi died. The Muslim workers from the house and the surrounding area attended the funeral, and there were many eulogies in the crypt. It was a great loss for the community, in truth he was a saintly confrere.

In May 1944 all the confreres were finally released, and so the community was fully re-established after three years of doubt and confusion.

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of visits to the community became disproportionate. Many visits, really very many, and many of them inappropriate (soldiers and British and Arab political representatives arriving just at lunchtime or dinnertime, and often they were forced to offer them accommodation). This phenomenon of visits was so accentuated that it further impoverished the economy of the house and became one of the main points to be dealt with in the Provincial visitations.

It was almost inevitable that this set of circumstances would have an influence on the running of the school. Although there were only a few cases, the fact is that some boys tried to escape from the school and some actually succeeded. It is reported in the chronicle that in October 1945 there was discontent among the boys because of much work and little study. In the face of all this, the confreres in charge did all they could to maintain the spirit of Valdocco in the circumstances in which they were forced to live.

1.14 Ubezzi Bartolomeo (1946–1949)

(15 sdb, 6 fma, 40 pupils)

Nothing much new appeared to happen in 1946 and 1947. everything continued more or less along the same lines, both the good and the bad (thefts, undesired visits, property issues, difficulties in the countryside and hence financial difficulties, etc.).

But perhaps it is appropriate to focus for a moment on the educational work that was carried out in those years; to focus on what helped the children entrusted by Divine Providence to grow up as good Christians and upright citizens:

The rhythm of time was marked by two types of events: the first was the needs of agricultural work and the second was the calendar of religious festivities. Here is a summary of the latter:

October: Triduum for the beginning of the year.

November: All Saints and commemoration of the Faithful Departed.

December: Novena and feast of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, St Stephen.

January: Epiphany, St Francis de Sales, Don Bosco.

February: Adoration (as well as games for Carnival)

March: St Joseph.

April: Retreat for the boys, Easter.

May: St Joseph the Worker, Bl. Mother Mazzarello, Novena and feast of Mary Help of Christians, Pentecost.

June: Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart (sometimes celebrated together), St Aloysius (often postponed to the end of the school year), Sts Peter and Paul.

July: Feast of gratitude (always coinciding with the end of the school year, and at time with the external feast of St Aloysius)

August: Feast of the Work of St Stephen, the Assumption, Mary Queen of Palestine (in August there were very few children left, usually those who were totally orphaned)

To these celebrations should be added the Rector's name day and any special occasions such as the first mass of new priests, anniversaries of priesthood and religious profession. These were valuable occasions for devoutly approaching the sacraments, having fun, playing some sport, having cinema and maybe even eating snacks. The festivities usually ended with academies; one only has to look at the programmes of these evenings to understand their educational quality.

Other pastoral activities were the celebrations of the sacraments of Christian initiation: baptism, confirmation and communion.

Thus, the Chronicle also records the triduum or novenas that the pupils made praying for the gift of rain, and often the prayers were answered in a few days.

Another activity that became more and more frequent (almost fortnightly) was the prize outing for good behaviour and performance. With time, an outing for the winners of the catechetical competition was also instituted, which – it seems – was carried out more seriously every year.

With the arrival of 1948 this semi-normal rhythm was severely disrupted. In January, a confrere miraculously escaped a bomb explosion, shootings were heard in the vicinity of Beitgemal leaving dead and wounded, thefts increased, and the Arabs became more overbearing and threatening.

In May, the British mandate ended and war broke out around Beitgemal. In June, Egyptian troops encircled the school. But in July the Jews regained control of the neighbouring areas. Egyptians and Palestinians settled in the Beitgemal grounds and each time there were more and more demands on services (water, bread, kitchen, stable, rooms, terrace). Once a confrere refused to fix rifles and a fine was imposed on him.

In August, the grape harvest could not be carried out. The boys were forced to suspend their holidays and stay in internment. On 21 September artillery shells were fired at the house in Beitgemal, and on 15 October more shells were fired (about twenty over the house), and a pupil was wounded in the arm. On the 17th five more shells were fired around the church.

On 18 October, the young people were unable to go outside due to the constant shelling. One of the shells fell on the roof of the sisters' church. Around ten o'clock the Arabs began to retreat. The officers who were in the community decided to withdraw and left around midnight with the families of the Arab farmers living in Beitgemal. Around two o'clock in the morning, the Jews arrived and, fearing that there were Arab soldiers in the compound, they made all the staff go out in front of the house with their hands raised. There was also a shoot-out at the sisters' convent as they opened the door. Everyone was rounded up in their workshop. The rooms were all opened, registered and robbed of valuables. There were 79 people in the sisters' convent and they remained prisoners there for a fortnight. The Jews took away the two cars and a thousand litres of wine from the cellar. The church, however, which was the most exposed, remained unharmed and closed, and they did not even try to enter.

All the Arabs from neighbouring towns had fled. Israeli troops settled in some parts of the community creating the usual problems. They gave orders not to communicate with wandering Arabs, not to leave the property boundaries and young people at work must always be accompanied by an Italian. The soldiers left in March 1949, in the meantime they offered minimal compensation (4,899 pounds sterling).

And so, with the creation of the State of Israel, a new phase had begun, one that in many respects was more difficult.

But in this time of need, the old friendship with the convent at Rafat became more intense. The Vincentians and the Minister for Forestry were very kind to the work at Beitgemal.

1.15 Barbieri Giovanni (1950–1954)

(11 sdb, 5 fma, 3 lay people, pupils from 32 to 13)

Fr Barbieri was appointed the Rector of Beitgemal in the summer of 1949, but he had to wait some months before he could cross the frontiers to get there and take up his new role; he would only manage to arrive there on 5 January.

Beitgemal, located fully in the State of Israel, was faced with new and unexpected difficulties. Salesian activity in its various forms that were tried and had gone ahead with so much effort, ended up being reduced to a minimum. The confreres, led by the Rector,

adapted themselves to heavy agricultural work to make up for the lack of labour, in an attempt to save what could be saved.

The families of the Muslim farmers who lived and worked in Beitgemal had fled in 1948, and the work had to cope with the demands of cultivation on its own, and the Rafat monastery was in the same situation, which explains the frequent exchanges of aid.

Not only the workers but also the number of pupils began to diminish. In fact, among the first of the laborious tasks Fr Barberi had to tackle was the paperwork for getting 5 of the boys out of Israel.⁷⁰ Then they saw more such paperwork. For a while new boys continued to arrive but fewer each year. In just four years the number was reduced from 32 to 13 pupils.

All in all, educational activities seemed to be carried out quite well. Grades for conduct and application tended to be good. The Salesians also felt proud of the catechetical competition. The fact remains, however, that study time was short, objectively speaking. While Salesian agricultural schools provided 16 hours of work in the countryside, in Beitgemal they did 26; then at the most critical times for night-time surveillance the youngsters had to help the Salesians keep guard. The Salesians thought up different strategies to relieve the young people's fatigue, but in times of crisis...

1.16 Dal Maso Eligio (1956–1958)

(10 sdb, 5 fma, 1 lay person, from 13 to 0 pupils)

Under the new government, almost all the Arabs had fled, and the number of pupils steadily decreased until 1957 when the school was practically closed. Neither the war nor its consequences were over.

In 1957, the Provincial and his Council took the decision to temporarily close the boarding school due to the conditions to which Beitgemal was subjected, especially the constant obstacles posed by the Israeli authorities. But the main reason for this decision was that the pupils were too exposed to military fire since they were constantly holding manoeuvres on the property where they were working.

1.17 From 1958–2011

The historical outline stops here at the first closure of the orphanage, as part of our analysis. But in the appendices⁷¹ of this work it continues from 1958 until today to

⁷⁰ One can guess that it was to reunite them with families who had fled to Syria or Lebanon.

⁷¹ Cf. *Historical survey of Beitgemal 1958–2011*. Appendix No. 3.

indicate that this reading of history in the light of faith is not only about a “glorious” past but can and must continue, convinced that God unceasingly reveals and educates in the story of every day.

2. Members of the community

Now that we have described the sequence of what happened, let us focus on individuals.

It is appropriate to begin by getting an idea of the numerical data on the members of the community, so that these will help to size up what is described later. Then we will move on to a more detailed analysis of the different existential circumstances of those who made up the Beitgemal community.

The numerical data⁷² are offered in relation to three concentric periods that can be useful for better contextualising the reflection. These are:

During the life of Salesian Simon Srugi: 1894–1943.

During the first half of the community history explored in this paper: 1891–1958.

During the 120-year history of the community: 1891–2011.

⁷² The data is substantially based on what is found in the different yearly editions of the “*Elenco dei Salesiani di Don Bosco*”. Cf. SALESIAN HEADQUARTERS, *Annuario. Salesiani di don Bosco, Direzione generale Opere Don Bosco*, Rome, S.D.B., 1890>2011.

But, this source offers us a twofold difficulty: The first is that not all the information found there is 100% correct and the second is a special disorder in the years 1941-1945 (due to the Second World War) so much so that for 1944-1945 the lists were not even published.

In the case of any errors scattered here and there, we have taken the liberty of correcting those that we were completely certain from other sources in the *Elenco*. But in cases where we could not clarify doubts we have reported the Information as it is written in the *Elenco*. This opens up a small margin of error for us in providing for these doubtful cases.

With respect to the gaps left by the confusion of information caused by the war between 1941 and 1945, we can say that we have tried to fill them with what we have from other sources. But for the sake of historical honesty, it must be said that even here there remains a certain margin of error; especially considering that, preoccupied with surviving the war, the registers are not well kept; these years coincide with the arrest of the Italian Salesians in the house at Bethlehem and consequently with the mobility to which the Provincial had to subject the few free Salesians in order to respond to the emerging needs of the various works.

Despite this, the data give us a context very close to what happened historically.

For more detailed information than is claimed Cf. *List of confreres living at Beitgemal (1892–2011) in chronological order according to the first year of their stay in the community* (Appendix No. 5); Cf. *List of confreres living at Beitgemal (1892–2011) in alphabetical order* (Appendix No. 6); Cf. *List of confreres living at Beitgemal who then left the Congregation* (Appendix No. 7); Cf. *List of confreres living at Beitgemal who then changed Province* (Appendix No. 8); Cf. *List of confreres living at Beitgemal who died in MOR* (Appendix No. 9).

	Simon Srugi 1894–1943	Period chosen 1891–1958	Entire history 1891–2011
No. of Salesians	113	141	166
Provenance	Local confreres 28 Missionaries 85	Local confreres 30 Missionaries 111	Local confreres 31 Missionaries 135
Time spent in the community	1 year 31 2 years 22 3 years 12 4-6 years 16 7-10 years 16 11-20 years 8 21-30 years 4 31-54 years 4	1 year 37 2 years 24 3 years 17 4-6 years 20 7-10 years 18 11-20 years 12 21-30 years 7 31-54 years 6	1 year 42 2 years 28 3 years 20 4-6 years 23 7-10 years 21 11-20 years 16 21-30 years 8 31-54 years 8
Mode of presence	Novices and clerics 20 Clerics-priests 14 Brothers 45 Priests 34 (+14)	Novices and clerics 23 Clerics-priests 17 Brothers 54 Priests 47 (+17)	Novices and clerics 27 Clerics-priests 18 Brothers 60 Priests 61 (+18)
Conclusion	Non-Salesians 26 To other Province 37 Died in MOR 50	Non-Salesians 31 To other Province 46 Died in MOR 64	Non-Salesians 32 To other Province 52 Died in MOR 72 Belonging to MOR 10

The following are some considerations that emerge from these figures, which can help us to better understand the reality of the community:

The confreres in the period studied (1881–1958) were in greater numbers and more mobilised than the subsequent periods (1958–2011). It is enough to think that in 52 years of difference only 25 more confreres lived in Beitgemal, while in a similar period those who lived with Simon Srugi were 113.

The ratio of local confreres to missionaries during Simon Srugi's lifetime was 1 to 3 (25%). Then the flow of Palestinian vocations and of those local confreres who could live and work in the new state of Israel was drastically halted. In fact, after the death of Simon Srugi only three local confreres worked in Beitgemal and for a relatively short period of time.

The confreres who remained in the community for less than three years were always around 60% or 50%. These numbers were swelled by the formation system in Fr Rua's

early period, in which the apostolic communities welcomed aspirants, novices and clerics into their midst, and not into special communities as was gradually decided.

After 1958 there was a proportional increase in the number of confreres who lived in the community for medium and long periods.

As a whole, the community was made up of 17% novices and clerics, 36% brothers and 47% priest confreres. But the relationship between priests and brothers/clerics has been reversed throughout history. It is enough to think that the first community was made up of one priest and the rest of the clerics and brothers (and this is how it continued for a long time) until today, when there are no young *formandi* and the community is made up of one brother and five priests.

The number of members who left the congregation, which in the whole of the history amounts to 20%, is highly influenced by the presence of the *formandi* in the community, the majority at the beginning and almost none in the later period.

Those transferred to other provinces are 32% of the total, more or less distributed throughout the history of the community. The reasons for the transfers are different: first of all one has to consider that, especially at the beginning, the obediences were very free and mostly centralised in Turin. It was therefore almost normal practice to pass with a certain ease from one province to another according to the new needs (and in this sense one finds many Salesians who, with an authentic spirit of generosity and obedience, did not question the orders given by their superiors); another group are those who asked to return home after a period of living together and working under very demanding conditions; others were forced to return for health reasons; finally a certain number were changed in order to resolve difficult situations.

We find throughout the history, in a more or less stable form, the 45% who have spent their entire lives in the Province.

141 confreres have lived in the Beitgemal community from 1891 to 1958, in very different existential situations, although they have built up the history of the one community.

But the unity of the community does not aim at uniformity or, even worse, anonymity, but tends to express together the multiplicity of gifts that the Spirit bestows on each member of the community.

To use an image from the musical world, one could say that the community is like a large orchestra: while the individual instruments play accurately their own part, the orchestra as a whole reproduces a symphonic masterpiece; or more exactly it reproduces the masterpiece composed by God from all eternity for that particular community. And while he continues to call other musicians to play in this living

orchestra, the Lord renews their repertory of musical compositions, adapting them from time to time to the possibilities and characteristics of the conductors.⁷³

It is this multiplicity of gifts offered by the Spirit we want to view more closely.

2.1 *Young confreres: aspirants, novices and clerics*

Initial formation is undoubtedly a period of preparation, a journey of maturity, a process of discernment and of increasing assumption of responsibility to reach the Salesian spiritual maturity required for perpetual profession. It is a dialogue between the confrere and the Congregation which aims to ascertain his suitability and maturity in view of his definitive incorporation.

Other articles of the Constitutions make this clear: “For the Salesian the time of initial formation is not so much a period of marking time as already one of work and holiness. It is a time of dialogue between God, whose initiative calls him and leads him forward and his own freedom as he gradually assumes responsibility for his own formation.”⁷⁴ Now let us see how all this plays out in *the Beitgemal community*.

2.1.1 *The data*

	Simon Srugi 1894–1943	Period chosen 1891–1958	Entire history 1891–2011
N° of Salesians Novices and clerics	Total 34 Clerics only 20 Clerics-priests 14	Total 40 Clerics only 23 Clerics-priests 17	Total 45 Clerics only 27 Clerics-priests 18
Provenance	Local confreres 9 Missionaries 25	Local confreres 9 Missionaries 31	Local confreres 10 Missionaries 35
Time spent in the community	1-3 years 20 4-6 years 7 7-10 years 3 11-30 years 3 31-54 years 1	1-3 years 24 4-6 years 7 7-10 years 3 11-30 years 4 31-54 years 2	1-3 years 29 4-6 years 7 7-10 years 3 11-30 years 4 31-54 years 2

⁷³ *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco, a guide to reading the Salesian Constitutions*, Rome, S.D.B., 1986, 336.

⁷⁴ C 105

	Simon Srugi 1894–1943	Period chosen 1891–1958	Entire history 1891–2011
Conclusion	Non-Salesians 10 To other Province 14 Died in MOR 10	Non-Salesians 10 To other Province 17 Died in MOR 11 Belong to MOR 2	Non-Salesians 12 To other Province 18 Died in MOR 11 Belong to MOR 4

2.1.2 Apostolic life

“The family spirit and the dynamic drive which is characteristic of our mission among young people make particularly important the contribution of young Salesians in the apostolate.”⁷⁵ So valid that in the first two decades the community was basically made up of young clerics and brothers.

The community chronicles tell of the abundant activity that these clerics proposed to reproduce the spirit of Valdocco (prayers, songs, theatres, walks, sports, feast days), along with commitments undertaken with true generosity and responsibility. The climate generated was so proactive that at that time 7 of the young people responded enthusiastically to the Salesian vocation. Twelve-year-old John Morosin spent time at Beitgemal; in this connection he recounts: “on 27 February 1897, I got on so well and became so attached to the Salesian environment that I decided to stay with Don Bosco forever.”⁷⁶

Clerics from the later period who lived in Beitgemal as practical trainees also left their mark:

“The three Cl. worked hard, despite the difficulty of the language; they were given special Arabic lessons. Their presence is very positive”,⁷⁷ and again “The cl. left the House for good to begin his theological studies. During the many years he spent in Beitgemal he always showed great commitment in his office of assistant and teacher, as well as a great love for work, including material work. All the confreres view his departure with regret and pray for his success. In his place will come another.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ C 46.

⁷⁶ *Lettera mortuaria di D. Giovanni Morosin*, in AIMOR, June 1963.

⁷⁷ *Cronaca* 1938, in ACB, 31 August 1938.

⁷⁸ *Cronaca* 1953, in ACB, 7 October 1953

2.1.3 *Spiritual characteristics*⁷⁹

As the Chronicle shows, the environment (economic, political, apostolic, community) in Beitgemal was never easy. It is true that some young confreres left the Congregation or changed Provinces as a natural development of their own discernment processes; but it is also undeniable that the various difficult situations sometimes served as a catalyst for these cases, at the same time demonstrating the virtue and readiness for formation of those who persevered:

Beitgemal, particularly in those days, was a very poor house and knew much deprivation, to the point that the practical trainee clerics sent there fled. In the opinion of the Province itself, the less intelligent and qualified were sent there.⁸⁰

From the histories of the 10 clerics who later became priests and then died while belonging to the Province, there are judgements of a repetitive nature such as: “he gave himself with zeal to correspond to the divine call”, “he shows progress in the life of perfection”, “piety, simplicity, candour of spirit”, “he gave shining examples of work”, “spirit of sacrifice”, “charity towards his neighbour”.

Cleric Thomas Farah deserves particular mention.⁸¹ He came from Galilee and excelled among his companions for his consistent study, sincere piety and amiable dealings. A beautiful soul. While his superiors were beginning to entertain the fondest hopes for him because of the truly admirable gifts of his mind and heart, he was assailed by a terrible disease which, after two years of unheard-of suffering, brought him to the grave. During the two years of forced inaction he sought to copy the example of Fr Andrea Beltrami, of whose biography he was a passionate reader. These were difficult times for the communities in Palestine.⁸² The war had also entered the Salesian communities, and a painful separation existed between the confreres. Thomas offered himself as a victim to the Lord so that agreement and peace might shine forth again.⁸³

⁷⁹ Cf. *Lettere mortuarie di: Almagian Giovanni, Byrne Kevin, Sarchis Pietro, Cantoni Ercole Luigi, Orio Moreno Luis, Tahat Fathallah, Frey Rodolfo, Morosini Giovanni, Galizzi Pietro, Katan (Catan) Pietro, Dal Maso Eligio, Botto Alessandro*, in ACB.

⁸⁰ *Summ.*, in *Positio super virtutibus. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Simoneis Sruji Laici Professi Societatis Salesianae*, Rome, 1988, 289.

⁸¹ To tell the truth, the story of the cleric Thomas Farah is more connected to Cremisan than to Beitgemal. But here is his testimony, which is nonetheless very significant and also in danger of being forgotten.

⁸² Cf. The following point “the question of the Arab confreres”, p. 61.

⁸³ Cf. *Lettera mortuaria di Ch. Farah Tommaso*, in AIMOR, April 1919.

2.2 Brothers

Salesian Brothers are the lay members of the Congregation. Their lay qualification gives a concrete and complementary aspect to their vocation: “The Salesian brother brings to every field of education and pastoral activity the specific qualities of his lay status which make him in a particular way a witness to God’s Kingdom in the world, close as he is to the young and to the working realities of life.”⁸⁴

The Middle East Province has an abundance of splendid brothers in its history.⁸⁵ Let us now focus on those who lived at Beitgemal.

2.2.1 Data

	Simon Srugi 1894–1943	Period chosen 1891–1958	Entire history 1891–2011
No. of Brothers Novices and clerics	45	54	60
Provenance	Local confreres 12 Missionaries 33	Local confreres 13 Missionaries 41	Local confreres 13 Missionaries 47
Time spent in the community	1-3 years 24 4-6 years 3 7-10 years 8 11-30 years 7 31-54 years 3	1-3 years 29 4-6 years 4 7-10 years 9 11-30 years 9 31-54 years 3	1-3 years 31 4-6 years 4 7-10 years 10 11-30 years 10 31-54 years 4
Conclusion	Non-Salesians 14 To other Province 13 Died in MOR 18	Non-Salesians 17 To other Province 13 Died in MOR 24	Non-Salesians 17 To other Province 15 Died in MOR 27 Belong to MOR 1

2.2.2 Apostolic life

Many apostolic activities carried out by the brothers are common to the Salesian tradition: teaching catechism, assisting children, teaching cultural subjects (such as languages) or technical subjects (such as agriculture).

⁸⁴ C 45.

⁸⁵ Cf. E. FORTI, *Fedeli a Don Bosco in Terra Santa*, Leuman, Elle Di Ci, 1988.

But almost always these activities were carried out together with particular jobs, in which they ended up specialising: for many brothers the countryside was their field of work and sanctification, but also the care of animals, the infirmary, the mill, the bakery, construction, help in the kitchen, the wardrobe, reception, the sacristy, supplies, accounting, economics...

Most important of all is to recognise the way in which these activities were carried out and the spirit in which they were done. The brothers often had roles that were not so visible, but they always carried them out with precision and fidelity, attracting not only the admiration and respect of the students and workers, most of whom were Muslims, but also establishing relations of sincere cordiality with them, because of the gentleness and goodness with which they knew how to treat everyone, without distinction of age or religion. Some even held special posts: mayor-peace mediator in Muslim villages (George Haruni). There are a number of young people, Jewish and Muslim, who decided to be baptised because of their friendship with Salesian brothers.

2.2.3 *Spiritual characteristics*⁸⁶

The community has truly beautiful testimonies. Among the most common elements are a passion for work, austerity, sacrifice (serene in adapting to uncomfortable schedules), obedience and humility. The brothers in Beitgemal were scrupulous in carrying out their duties and being accountable for them; they had a deep sense of responsibility combined with a spirit of sacrifice to the fullest extent.

As genuine sons of Don Bosco they knew how to combine work with prayer. Their faith was simple and strong; renewed through meditation, spiritual reading and pious practices. Very regular in community life, they drew the strength to nourish their many activities from the sacraments, even at the cost of serious sacrifices.

They were cordial and pleasant in human relationships. They were distinguished by their simplicity, attentive to their confreres. They were elements of unity in the community: combining astuteness, friendliness and affectionate respect...

They had the gift of making friends with those they met, not through erudition but by the witness of their lives. Because of their various roles they were also well known in non-Christian circles, where they were not ashamed to profess their faith with simplicity,

⁸⁶ Cf. *Lettere mortuarie di: Deferraris Giovanni, Tesio Marco, Pogliotti Luigi, Zanchetta Giacomo, Bonamino Giovanni Battista, Flesia Giovanni, Liverani Giuseppe, Baccaro Antonio, Hauila Giuseppe, Haruni Giorgio, Biagi Nicola, Kren Giuseppe, Ghezzi Luigi, Aloï Giuseppe, Zodo Fulvio, Prometti Giovanni, Fusi Giuseppe, Chiaudano Nicola, Combaz Naim, Castelli Giovanni*, in AIMOR.

arousing acceptance and sympathy everywhere. They were held in the highest esteem by Muslim peasants.

2.3 Priests

“The Salesian priest or deacon brings to the common work of promoting human development and of educating in the faith the specific quality of his ministry, which makes him a sign of Christ the Good Shepherd, especially by preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.”⁸⁷ The tasks carried out by the Salesian priests in Beitgemal are many, but there is a common denominator: carrying out their tasks with a priestly heart, being heralds of the Word, sanctifiers and animators of the community.

2.3.1 Data

	Simon Srugi 1894–1943	Period chosen 1891–1958	Entire history 1891–2011
No. of Salesians clerics and priests	Total 48 Clerics-priests 14 Priests 34	Total 64 Clerics-priests 17 Priests 47	Total 79 Clerics-priests 18 Priests 61
Provenance	Local confreres 11 Missionaries 37	Local confreres 12 Missionaries 52	Local confreres 12 Missionaries 67
Time spent in the community	1-3 years 21 4-6 years 11 7-10 years 8 11-30 years 6 31-54 years 2	1-3 years 29 4-6 years 13 7-10 years 9 11-30 years 10 31-54 years 3	1-3 years 34 4-6 years 17 7-10 years 10 11-30 years 14 31-54 years 3
Conclusion	Non-Salesians 3 To other Province 16 Died in MOR 29	Non-Salesians 3 To other Province 20 Died in MOR 39 Belong to MOR 2	Non-Salesians 3 To other Province 26 Died in MOR 42 Belong to MOR 7

⁸⁷ C 45.

2.3.2 Apostolic life

The priests in Beitgemal served as rectors, prefects, eonomers (bursars), teachers (especially in languages and music), assistants, group leaders and farm managers. Prominent among them were great scholars, confessors and preachers. The priests at Beitgemal exercised their pastoral ministry with the Christian communities of the surrounding area and especially with the religious communities of Rafat; as well as with the confreres and sisters, the young people and the workers of the house.

Many of them are remembered as true apostles who gave generously to do good works, with humility and simplicity, with a big heart and a lot of kindness.

Their strong faith and ardent charity made them generous men, ready to serve their neighbour, to the point of total self-denial. They gave themselves completely to their educational mission: sincerely loving the young and doing their best especially for the poorest.

This spirit of hard work was nourished by a deep piety, which sometimes had expressions of evangelical simplicity, and was associated with a great love of poverty. Many of them showed themselves to be self-sacrificing workers (especially on the farm) in the hard and trying times of their work.

Periods of transition, especially when they were prolonged, always brought unforeseen difficulties and problems and tested the faith, ability and patience of those with the greatest responsibility. Throughout the different periods and trials, there was no lack of temptation to abandon all this.

The Rector Major, Fr Ricaldone, replied in 1939 to a letter venting his feelings at a moment of discouragement: “If I didn’t know you, I would almost be tempted to pull your ears, but since I know that you are a very good son, I will limit myself to saying to you: my dear friend, stay put where the Lord wants you, and carry your cross with generosity. If you have debts you can say the Our Father with greater fervour, repeating with faith: *Dimitte nobis debita nostra!*”⁸⁸

And many of them remained to carry the cross as far as their physical and spiritual strength would allow them... and some, with the Lord’s help, wore themselves out to the end for the young people and the poor of Beitgemal.

⁸⁸ *Lettera di D. Ricaldone a D. Antonio Candiani*, in ACB, 12 September 1939.

2.3.3 Spiritual characteristics⁸⁹

We have insisted enough on the difficult situations experienced in Beitgemal; in fact, as the data show, three of them left the priesthood, several asked for a change of community and even of province, and others moved for various needs, obedience or health reasons.

A not inconsiderable group of priests remained faithful in the fulfilment of their mission. They had to embody the typical features of priestly ministry in the conditions imposed by the particular Salesian apostolate in Beitgemal.

Among them we find great scholars and other rather simple confreres, energetic and strong men and others not so robust, some very active and enterprising and others with a rather calmer approach. But in the midst of these and other legitimate differences, some common traits can be identified:

Sensitivity for the poor, especially orphans, with a generous hard-working approach to evangelise, educate and serve them. An unquenchable zeal to do good to souls through the exercise of the priestly ministry in community animation, preaching and sanctification (through the sacraments) of the portion of God's people entrusted to them.

As good Salesians they were aware that the *da mihi animas* cannot be disconnected from the *cetera tolle*; from what is frequently found to be heroic sacrifice, an attitude of obedience, regularity in the performance of one's duty, love of work, patience and austere mortification.

Among the most edifying examples offered by these men was their ability to allow themselves to be challenged in their spiritual formation by the different circumstances they faced.

They demonstrated a sense of what was real and the ability to grasp the essential in everything and in every circumstance. Hence their willingness to do good was faithfully upheld in God's name, paying personally for their witness to the values of the kingdom; learning, from what affected them directly, that good is not obtained without sacrifice.

In Beitgemal we find Salesians with a lively piety, faithful to community practices and regular in their personal conversations with Jesus, full of affectionate, profound and sometimes mystical expressions.

Their very keen devotion to Mary experienced in Beitgemal was manifested in daily life and also in the great feasts. Thus, devotion to St Joseph was also very much heartfelt.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Lettere mortuarie di: Varaia Antonio, Testori Luigi, Latour Giacomo, Fergnani Giovanni, Nahas Giovanni, Pasquali Eugenio, Ponzo Vincenzo, Vercauterer Carlo, Lopez Rafael Arturo, Gossler Karl, Sacchetti Alfredo, Bonatti Costantino, Marsegaglia Pietro, Calis Joseph, Luserna Sebastiano, Villa Giovanni, Laiolo Luigi, Auad Atalla, Candiani Antonio, Galliani Giuseppe, Barbieri Giovanni, Spiridione Roumman, Reggio Antonio, Ubezzi Bartolomeo, Ponzetti Giulio, Sciueri Khalil, Morra Michelangelo*, in AIMOR.

Contact with diversity (ritual, religious, cultural) led many of them to develop the typically Salesian attitudes of openness and cordiality. In fact, many of them showed that they had received the gift of sympathy from the Holy Spirit and had committed themselves to modelling their relational skills on the gentleness of Christ's heart.

Finally, the priesthood of many of the confreres at Beitgemal was marked by their closeness to the memory of Saint Stephen and their work of extending Christian forgiveness, honouring this memory (in addition to devotional dissemination) with their testimonies of Christian indulgence in the daily routine of life, but also through heroic gestures.

2.4 Elderly and sick confreres

“For a Salesian accustomed to exuberant activity, serious illness and the infirmities of old age are particularly painful trials which form an appeal to a more living faith and a new kind of fidelity, and they call for a deepening of vocation itself.”⁹⁰

At Beitgemal, in addition to the natural cycle of life and the physical weakening produced by hardships and difficult situations, the confreres often had to contend with malaria, which in several cases led to their death, or otherwise left serious repercussions on their health.

In the mortuary letter accounts, one can identify several perspectives that challenge us:

From the confreres' own experience, these hard times were their own *Kairos* (time of grace) in spiritual formation and growth. By daily renewing the offering of their lives marked by pain, they united themselves to the redemptive passion of the Lord. Certainly, for many, it was a call to relaunch their Salesian soul.

From the intimate attitude of offering oneself in Christ to the Father for the salvation of the world, explicit prayers spontaneously sprang up, occupying a privileged place in the long hours of patience of the suffering Salesians, in union with their confreres and on behalf of the young people. During these periods of illness, the confreres gave witness to their spiritual formation, their love for God and for the Congregation.

Many times they did not want to disturb anyone and looked after themselves, without expressing any complaint or recrimination against one or other problem, accepting their situation from the hands of God.

The testimonies of their efforts to continue, even in reduced activity, to contribute to the apostolic work of the Congregation are beautiful:

⁹⁰ Cf. *Project of Life of the Salesians*, 341

He had the hard-working temperament of the kind forged through contact with the first generation of Salesians. He could never stand still. When he was induced to take a rest, his parting words were always the same: “if you need me, call me!”⁹¹

Always alert, always at his post, despite his age and ailments, with an admirable spirit of sacrifice he spent his last energies unsparingly.⁹²

But the *Kairos* was also for the younger confreres who had an opportunity to express their love and gratitude for their predecessors, so many times fathers and teachers in the faith, and to surround them with care and affection:

His *Via Crucis* was to see himself the recipient of special care and attention when his desire was to take some of the burden off the community. But the confreres were certain that the sufferings he endured and offered to God ensured the effectiveness of the common mission.⁹³

3. The question of the Arab confreres

During the First World War a problem of relationships that had existed from the beginning in the Middle East Province became far more prominent. The epicentre of the problem was experienced in Bethlehem, but was not without its repercussions in the rest of the communities, especially in Beitgemal. It was a question of overcoming feelings of nationalism between foreign missionaries and local vocations, the tension of planting the original charism and a serious effort of inculturation... Problems and difficulties that can be exacerbated by occasional circumstances. The world conflagration ended up fuelling pre-existing tensions, even without intending to do so, within the communities in which Italian, French, Belgian, German, Spanish and, of course, Arab confreres lived...

Archival sources clearly reveal this moment of conflict.

The conflict gradually began to be expressed more openly after the works in Palestine were placed under the Italian Protectorate in 1904. What aroused the reaction of the Arab confreres, apart from the easily understandable general reasons, was the fact that in the Orphanages Italian had come to prevail over Arabic in all expressions of life, even in religious and liturgical matters.

Then when Italy went to war against the Central Empires in 1915, all the Italians, many of whom were Rectors of Salesian houses or held positions of responsibility there, had to leave their posts and houses and were gathered together in Jaffa. All the positions were then taken over by the Arab confreres, who joyfully welcomed the hour of their own affirmation in the houses, where until now they had been somewhat

⁹¹ *Lettera mortuaria di Fergnani Giovanni*, in AIMOR, December 1932.

⁹² *Lettera mortuaria di Laiolo Luigi*, in AIMOR, December 1959.

⁹³ *Lettera mortuaria di Casagrande Ferdinando*, in AIMOR, August 1977.

subordinate. However, against all expectations, at the last moment the Ottoman government prevented the Italian confreres from leaving and going to Egypt. Indeed, they were sent back to the Salesian houses, where they resumed the positions and responsibilities they had had before.

It was the occasion that set off a strong stance against the Italians and, by reflex, against their superiors.⁹⁴

The clearest forms in which it manifested itself were: restrictions on the use of Arabic in favour of Italian and French; accusations of discrimination between Europeans and Arabs in the distribution of posts and offices; persistent dualism, in some communities, between native and European personnel; suspicion of betrayal by some Arab Salesians as the cause of the imprisonment of Italian Salesians; open disobedience to Italian superiors, and voluntary imprisonment of the main ones responsible in the Bethlehem orphanage.

Due to the imprudence of some the conflict became public, with the intervention of ecclesiastical and even civil authorities, and invitations (amid reticence and resistance) from the superiors to come to Turin to clarify matters. The matter seemed so difficult that the Provincial Council, in its meeting of 2 May 1918, suggested to the Superior Chapter, as the only possible solution, “dismissal from the Congregation of six from Bethlehem [...]. If this punishment is not to be extended to all, at least it should be applied to the leaders [...]. The others are to be sent out of the Middle East Province and separated from each other.”⁹⁵ And all this after the war had just ended, while the houses were half functioning and the Salesians were struggling to heal their wounds. An extraordinary visitation from Turin was indispensable. Here is the report drawn up by Fr Ceria, the Congregation’s historian:

Once the war was over, an internal disturbance persisted in the Salesian houses in Palestine, which had distant origins and did not cease to cause serious disturbances. Nationalism, ignited after the expulsion of the Sultan by the Young Turks and fed by them incessantly, inflamed the Arabs, even those who had become Salesians when Fr Belloni had incorporated his Palestinian work into Don Bosco’s Congregation. Nothing foments dissension, rivalry and parties worse than political passion. In our case, the new Turkish government’s antipathy towards Europeans served to stoke the fire continuously, especially against Italians. The result was an unbearable state of affairs, which was now known outside and scandalised the population. As soon as it was possible to travel, Fr Albera, desirous of restoring peace, sent Fr Peter Ricaldone

⁹⁴ *Informatio, in Positio super virtutibus. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Simoneis Sruigi Laici Professi Societatis Salesianae*, Rome, 1988, 120-121.

⁹⁵ Most important archival sources on the subject: *Corrisp. con D. Albera, D. Ricaldone e D. Gusmano di D. Sutura* (some of these letters form a Memoriale) in ASC 31.22 MO, from Sept. 1912 to Dec. 1919; *Memorandum di D. E. Bianchi a D. Ricaldone*, in ASC 31.22 MO, 22.10.1918. And scattered: *Corrisp. Con D. Albera a D. Ricaldone di D. Arena, Simonetti, Vercauteren, Villa G.*, in ASC 31.22 MO, 1918.

the Professional Schools Councillor on the Superior Chapter, to Palestine with full powers. Peter Ricaldone, who landed in Asia on 17 December 1918, stayed for more than two months in the land of Jesus until, with his tact marked by charity and prudence, he seemed to have brought things back to normal. This was not, however, achieved all at once, nor as soon as it had seemed it would need to happen; but once it was achieved once it was never again disturbed.⁹⁶

If only Fr Ceria's rather wishful judgement had been true when he stated that normality "once it was achieved was never again disturbed". Certainly things did not reach such a scandalous point again; but history shows that the wound had not healed (it is enough to remember what was said about the community problems in 1939).

At this point it seems appropriate to emphasise some questions that remain open: had the problem really been solved? To what extent had a sound response been given to the causes of the problem, rather than resolving only the consequences? Was the method of resolution the right one? What consequences did it bring? (In other words: was peace really achieved? And at what price?). Do these facts come to mind in the living memory of the Province or have they been forgotten? (Keep in mind the adage: those who do not know history are forced to repeat it). Are we remembering what happened with Christian maturity, or at most are we passing on urban legends that feed the reasons for continuing to divide us and offend one another? How much has been learned from the experience? Is there the readiness to reinterpret the events in the light of faith, and to come out of that memory more grown up? This is precisely the formative-spiritual work that an interpretation in the light of faith must help to tackle.

In 1918, the affair ended with several local Salesians requesting and being accepted by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem to join the diocesan clergy;⁹⁷ the others, spread across various houses, some in Italian provinces, were reintegrated into Salesian life.

4. Salesian representatives

It is well known that the history of Beitgemal is closely related to the experiences of great Salesians who have lived in this work and have admirably manifested their radical following of Christ while there.

Notwithstanding the above description, it is now worth highlighting the profile of those figures who have shaped the face of the Beitgemal community. These are Fr Antonio Belloni, Bro. Angelo Bormida, Fr Eugenio Bianchi and Fr Mario Rosin. Obviously the

⁹⁶ E. CERIA, *Annali IV*, Turin, Edizione Internazionale, 1951, 68-69.

⁹⁷ *Corrisp. Con D. Albera, lett. di D. Sutura*, in ASC 31.22 MO, 9.10.1919; *Corrisp. Con Capitoli., lett. di D. Sutura a D. Gusmano*, in ASC 31.22 MO, 19.01.1919.

lives of these great Salesians are also accompanied by that of Simon Srugi, but he will be presented in detail in chapter three.

4.1 Fr Antonio Belloni⁹⁸

Canon Antonio Belloni, known as *Abuliatama* (Father of the Orphans of Palestine), was born in Borgo Sant'Agata (Italy) on 20th August 1831 to Giuseppe Belloni and Paola Armelio. After his studies in the diocesan seminary of Albenga, feeling called by the Lord to the missions, he entered Brignole Sale College in Genoa in 1855. He was ordained a priest there on 19 December 1857. From the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide he was destined for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and filled with holy enthusiasm he left on 22 April 1859.

Sent to the seminary at Betgiala by Patriarch Valerga, while he zealously attended to the education and instruction of clerics, seeing the painful difficulties in which many Christian and non-Christian boys found themselves and moved by the living Spirit of the Lord, he opened a school in a small house near the seminary and shortly afterwards, on 20 May 1863, a small orphanage with the son of a poor blind man entrusted to him by Providence.

As the little house in Betgiala was no longer sufficient, on 1 July 1864, the orphanage was moved to Bethlehem, where, thanks to the zeal of Fr Belloni and the help of illustrious benefactors, it developed into one of the most distinguished charitable institutions in Palestine.

The great desire to collect as many abandoned young people as possible moved him to open a large school in Beitgemal in 1878, another in Cremisan in 1886, and to prepare the school in Nazareth which was then inaugurated in 1896. Only the Lord knows how much effort and pain all these works cost him, for whose glory alone Fr Belloni worked.

Fr Belloni sought above all to give his children a religious education. He insisted a great deal on catechism: to this end he set up competitions, awarded prizes to the winners.

Daily Mass, the recitation of morning and evening prayers and of the Holy Rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Confession and Communion done well were the basis of his educational system. Nothing concerned him more than making these young people good children of God, instilling in them a delicate sense of Christian morality.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Cf. *Lettera mortuaria di D. Antonio Belloni*, in AIMOR, August 1903; G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama, il "Padre degli orfani" nel paese di Gesù, il can. A. Belloni*, TORINO, SEI, 1955; J. BORREGO, *I salesiani nel Medio Oriente* (PRO-MANUSCRIPTO), BETHLEHEM, IN AIMOR, 1983.

⁹⁹ G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama*, 38.

As well as providing material aid, Providence also sent him excellent co-workers. In order to provide the necessary personnel for the orphanages, the Lord inspired him to found the work of the Brothers of the Holy Family, which began on the Feast of the Patronage of St Joseph 1874.

Fr Belloni was a great admirer of Don Bosco, whose initiatives he mirrored, and on 9 November 1890, with the full consent of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, he entrusted all his work to the Salesian Congregation; and he himself became a Salesian, making his profession on 7 July 1893.

This merger, which had so consoled the good Canon's heart because it ensured the perpetuity of his work, was opposed by the local ecclesiastical authorities. Fr Belloni remained, with all his conviction, close to the Salesians. And when the Salesians, unable to accept the conditions that Patriarch Piavi wanted to impose, declared themselves ready to leave, Fr Belloni showed himself ready to leave with them. His title as Canon was withdrawn, and the good priest saw in that act only a more perfect adherence to the religious life he had generously embraced. But this conviction of Fr Belloni's led the Patriarch to accept the presence of the Salesians.

This was not the first opposition that Fr Belloni had to endure. Since 1863 he had had to fight against adversaries of all kinds: ecclesiastical, religious, civil; with people from Bethlehem themselves in whose midst he found himself, as they could not bear the fact that orphans should be taught the work of making pious items. He had struggled with poverty and had also patiently endured the abandonment of some of his co-workers and the ingratitude of some of his benefactors. Trusting in God, he had always continued to spread good by the handful. He was always generous with everyone, and the same hand that protected the orphan was able to lift up many other unfortunates too. Charity, according to him, had to have no boundaries or barriers.

After becoming a Salesian, he continued to direct the Bethlehem Orphanage, but he was always concerned about the needs of the other houses in Palestine.

Afflicted by a long illness, diabetes, which he endured with Christian resignation, he was surrounded by his confreres and orphans, to whom he addressed the most tender words and left the most affectionate memories, and from his dear Bethlehem Orphanage he flew to Heaven on the evening of 9 August 1903.

4.2 *Angelo Bormida*¹⁰⁰

Son of Giacomo Bormida and Anna Biglia, Angelo was born in Turin on 14 January 1870. He entered the Oratory on 10 November 1881 and from there, moved by generosity, he

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Lettera mortuaria di Angelo Bormida*, in AIMOR December 1917; E. FORTI, *Fedeli a don Bosco in Terra Santa*, 21-40.

went to San Benigno Canavese where he began his novitiate on 20 November 1888 and then made his religious profession on 18 November 1890. A man of strong intentions, he immediately made his perpetual profession and asked to go on mission, where he showed his attachment to the Congregation for which he lavished all the fine qualities of his commitment.

He was a very skilled master carpenter and bandmaster, a man of versatile genius and always successful in whatever task was entrusted to him by his superiors. After his religious profession he was sent for some time to Sarrià (Spain) and when he felt the need for a skilled carpenter for the Technical School in Bethlehem, he was ready to leave for Palestine.

He arrived in Bethlehem on 8 October 1891 and remained there for 25 years, starting his usual occupations with the same commitment every year. He was never able to return home and did not leave Bethlehem until the beginning of 1916 during the First World War. Together with the other Italian confreres, he had to go to Beitgemal, as the Orphanage in Bethlehem had been occupied by Turkish soldiers. He stayed in Beitgemal for about two years and, with his enterprising spirit, tried in every way to overcome the boredom of forced residence. This is how he became a credit to the Congregation and the Church because, under the direction of the illustrious Benedictine, Father Maurice Gisler, he undertook the excavations that led to the discovery of the primitive sepulchre of the protomartyr Saint Stephen in Beitgemal (Kafargamala).

He was the first sad victim of the war. Already targeted by the Turkish authorities in Bethlehem due to ill-intentioned insinuations by his Salesian confreres of Arab origin, he was also persecuted in the Beitgemal place of retreat, where he was arrested on 4 September 1917 on the charge of having a wireless telegraphy device that did not exist.

Taken to the prisons in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, he was supposed to be deported to Damascus, but he fell ill with typhus and, unable to withstand the mistreatment and fatigue of the journey, was left dying in Nablus prison. He was transferred to the Turkish military hospital.

Recognised as a Christian and religious by the Sisters of St Joseph, he had time to receive the sacraments, to recount the events of his imprisonment and to show his gratitude to the good sisters. He died forgiving his persecutors on 11 December 1917.

4.3 *Eugenio Bianchi*¹⁰¹

The son of Natale and Rosa Bizzocchi, Eugenio was born in Coriano (Rimini) on 26 March 1853. He studied at the Seminary in Rimini and was ordained a priest on 17 March 1877.

He was chaplain in a church in Rimini when, in 1880, he decided on a trip to the main cities in Italy and bought a round trip train ticket for the purpose. Turin was to be the first stop, because he wanted to see Don Bosco, whom he already knew by reputation.

What the saint said to him is not known; the fact is that Fr Bianchi abandoned the idea of travelling and went to Lanzo to make the retreat, at the end of which he had irrevocably decided to remain with Don Bosco.

He returned home for a few days, and on 4 October 1880 he presented himself at the Oratory, and on the 13th of the same month he began his Novitiate at San Benigno. He made his perpetual vows on 4 October 1881 and remained in that house for five years, where he did a bit of everything, as he said, but in reality we know that he effectively assisted and even replaced Fr Giulio Barberis in his care and formation of the young novices.

In fact, when the novitiate house for clerics opened in Foglizzo, Don Bosco himself sent Fr Eugenio as the Rector. He remained there until 1897, lavishing the most assiduous care on more than a thousand young men, and all of them kept alive in their hearts the memory of his fatherly kindness, which in many cases was also as tender as a mother. He sympathised with youth and demanded only the little that each one was capable of. Fr Eugenio Bianchi formed a legion of talented Salesians in Foglizzo who then spread all over the world. Among the novices he initiated into Salesian life were: Blessed Louis Variara, Blessed Augustus Czartoryski, Venerable Andrea Beltrami and Venerable Vincent Cimati.

On the evening of Wednesday of Holy Week 1896, a massive rush of blood cut off his speech: his condition immediately became serious and his life was feared for; but he revived and was sent to a health resort. He never returned to Foglizzo.

In November 1897 he was Rector in Ivrea. In Ivrea his field of work was even wider, but Fr Bianchi showed himself equal to the task entrusted to him. The house had the Sons of Mary, novice clerics or clerical students of philosophy: there were from many countries around Europe and the majority were not young. Foreigners were unanimous in stating that Fr Bianchi had unforgettable consideration and refinement in their regard. In Ivrea, as in Foglizzo, his leadership was strong, as befits a true father. More than once he was heard to express his fear that the sense of fatherliness, as he felt it, would diminish among

¹⁰¹ *Lettera Mortuaria di D. Eugenio Bianchi*, in AIMOR, January 1931.

the Salesians. His openness to understanding and his constant optimism sustained many souls in their sad hours of discouragement and saved many vocations from foundering. He remained there until the first months of 1911, when he fell ill again and his superiors sent him to Bordighera to recover.

In 1912 he was entrusted with the mission of starting a visitation of some Salesian agricultural schools. To this end he embarked for Palestine on 9 November. The Rector Major sent him there for a few months... he remained for more than 18 years until his death.

Beitgemal became his home. He was its Rector from 1914 to 1926: he devoted his activities to it with enthusiasm and, with great tact, he knew how to keep his confreres close to him. This was the secret of the happy results of the Beitgemal School, at that time recognised as a model agricultural school in Palestine.

During World War I he was the loving father of all the Salesians in Palestine who took refuge in Beitgemal, the only house that was allowed to remain open, in the company of 200 Turkish soldiers. He had to witness kidnappings, confiscations and depredations that he endured with great resignation, while comforting those who desperately struggled to minimise the consequences of these disasters. Once the storm of the war had passed, Fr Bianchi set to work with renewed ardour, and had the consolation of seeing his beloved agricultural school flourish once more.

Providence had something in store for him at Beitgemal – the joy of seeing the fruit of the work of those who, through their studies, research and excavations, identified the ancient Kafargamala in Beitgemal and discovered the tomb of St Stephen crowned with happy success. And after this happy event, he worked with untiring zeal to organise the Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness in honour of St Stephen, and to build a decent church at the Saint's tomb. He saw a part of it built, the *Martyrium*, in which he invested his entire family inheritance.

Fr Bianchi was able to temper the strength of his Romagnolo character with the gentleness of a Salesian, and worked with zeal for God and souls. He was sustained by a deep piety: he was very devoted to the Sacred Heart and to the Blessed Virgin Mary. He celebrated Mass with diligent precision and edifying devotion. After his love for God and the Blessed Virgin, another love towered in his generous soul: love for Don Bosco and the Congregation. He had the consolation of seeing Italy again in 1929 for the beatification of Don Bosco, but in October of that year he had to undergo a very painful operation. Unable to bear a second one, he returned to Beitgemal to prepare for death. He received the last sacraments on time and at dawn on 11 January 1931 he passed away peacefully.

4.4 *Mario Rosin*¹⁰²

Mario Rosin was born in Trieste on 8 November 1875. Sent to Palestine immediately after his novitiate in 1891 with a host of clerics and brothers, he was the first vigorous addition to the Salesian Congregation in Fr Belloni's Family. But while his companions in the mission, after working in the Middle East for many years, were then sent by the obedience to other destinations, he alone remained in the field of work, untiring, exhausting all his energies, to give so many generations of poor orphans food, clothing and work.

Having arrived in Jesus' own land, he remained there until his tragic death and spent 47 years working and sacrificing himself for the good of the young people in the houses in Bethlehem, Cremisan, Nazareth and Beitgemal.

He was truly an exemplary religious, even if his inner virtue was sometimes concealed by a somewhat rough exterior. Among the virtues that stood out most in him was a constant sincerity which he candidly and courageously displayed even in the most difficult moments.

His faith, nourished by the exact observance of pious practices, made his trust in God strong and unlimited, both in the face of the material hardships of his orphanage and in accepting what obedience disposed, putting up with all the contrariness and trials of life.

He was always animated by the purest religious spirit of poverty and obedience, scrupulous to the point of the most difficult sacrifices: the means that Providence sent him did not remain in his hands, but immediately took the shortest route of his numerous creditors: he seemed to have a repugnance for money. As Rector he never used a bed: in Bethlehem he slept on a chair, on the landing of a staircase leading to the terrace, and in summer on the hard floor, resting his head on a small wooden box. In his room there was an instrument of discipline which he had to use secretly. In the morning, at 4 o'clock, he was always up for Mass and confessions.

One of the most painful episodes in Fr Rosin's life was during the First World War. Declared a prisoner shortly before the British entered Jerusalem, he was sent with other confreres to be interned in the heart of Turkey. Two of them lost their lives on the journey due to hardship and illness. Fr Rosin had to go to prison in Damascus and was thrown into a hall where criminals of all kinds were gathered. The hall resounded with curses, filthy language and brawls. He said that living with such criminals was the most painful punishment of his life.

In Angora he was taken to hospital, sick with typhus. After leaving the hospital he spent a year of hardship and privation with other deportees in Keskin. Once the storm had

¹⁰² *Lettera Mortuaria di D. Mario Rosin*, in AIMOR, July 1938; O. PEDRAZZI, *Una croce in terra santa. In memoria di don Mario Rosin*, Rome, Scuola Salesiana del Libro, 1938.

passed, he returned with full confidence to his place of peaceful struggle. He continued his charitable work for another 20 years, doing good to all and evil to none.

In 1937, for a second time, despite his resistance, he accepted the role of Rector of the Beitgemal House.

In the same year, the British authorities, in order to have easier access to weather data from the local observatory in Beitgemal, connected the house with the police station in Artuf railway station by telephone line. And given the Palestinian Arab uprisings against the British who they suspected of protecting the Israelis, the Arabs thought the phone was for spying on them, especially since one of the leaders had been captured and killed by the police shortly after the phone was installed. Therefore, the Arab rebels swore revenge against the Rector of the Salesian House.

Father Rosin was asked by the Patriarch to see to confessions at the two communities in nearby Rafat, where the new shrine to Our Lady Queen of Palestine had been erected, and he went there punctually every week. It was by fulfilling this delicate duty as a priest that the Lord considered him ripe for heaven.

On 23 June, on his way back from Rafat to the community, a big man with a veiled face crossed the road, grabbed the reins of his horse and forced Fr Rosin to dismount. Then he blew a whistle and 14 other men emerged from nearby hiding places, then declared: “You have had a telephone planted between your house and Artuf; you have had Issa Battat [the rebel leader mentioned] arrested and killed. Now we have orders to kill you too.”

Fr Rosin, suddenly and rudely faced with certain death, began sobbing and replied: “But no, I am a poor priest who has never harmed anyone.” His words were drowned out by the thud of stones hitting him. At the thought of the sacrifice of his life, which he had foreseen and announced in intimate moments to his confreres, and perhaps invoked, the victim regained control of his faculties, and no further moan nor groan escaped his lips until he drew his last breath.

Up to this point this has been the story of the experience of the Beitgemal community, which we have tried to approach from different perspectives in order to have as complete an overview as possible. Facts, dates, numbers, stories, faces have told us about a relational experience rich in humanity and charism. Humanity that is both wounded by sin and redeemed by the love of Jesus. The Salesian charism that provides evidence of its universal validity, which does not, however, conceal the difficulties of achieving healthy inculturation.

In full continuity with this chapter, we will dwell on the figure of Bro. Srugi in the following chapter. He is the most precious gift of God to flourish in the MOR Province. These two chapters illuminate each other and together form the historical and critical basis of our research.

Chapter Three

Simon Srugi

*“O Father, in the Church of the Easy
you raised up Simon Srugi,
humble apostle of unity and loving witness
of your Son Jesus
in a world that still does not know you,
through the mission of the
Good Samaritan of souls and bodies.
we ask you to make us
courageous imitators of his virtues
so that, in the Spirit,
your plan of love may be fulfilled.”
(proposed Collect prayer)*

Beitgemal was the field of life and action of the greatest of Don Bosco's sons in the Holy Land. This is the intimate relationship between the previous chapter two and the present chapter three. One cannot understand the history of Beitgemal without highlighting the life of Simon Srugi; but neither can one understand the greatness of the *Good Samaritan of Nazareth* if one eradicates its vital context, that is, the work and the community at Beitgemal.

1. Biography

1.1 Childhood and adolescence

Simon Srugi, the last of 10 children of Azar and Dalleh Ibraim Khawali, was born in Nazareth on 27th April 1877. About 15 days after his birth, with the solemnity that is customary in Eastern countries, the infant was baptised and with baptism also received

the sacrament of confirmation, as is customary in the Eastern Church. Baptism was conferred in the Greek Catholic parish of Nazareth.

Simon, whose father was a Melkite Greek Catholic, had to follow the religious practice of this rite during his childhood and assimilated its spirituality within the limits of his child-like soul.

A painful event, which must have influenced the events, and probably also Simon's character, was the loss of his parents. It is not certain when he became an orphan, because there are different versions,¹⁰³ but certainly very soon. Orphaned, Simon, the last of the brothers, was taken in by his paternal grandmother.

During his childhood years, Simon is remembered as a good-natured, calm, very pious boy, as thin as a blade of grass, rather shy and sad as a natural consequence of being an orphan.

During his childhood he was shy and easily cried over little things, because he felt he was an orphan. He was calm and obedient to his grandmother, but like all boys he would sometimes play deaf when called upon. He was an ordinary boy like many others.¹⁰⁴

Around the age of 11, in 1888, he entered the Bethlehem Orphanage, founded by Fr Antonio Belloni. Here he probably made his First Communion, improved on his previous fragmentary education and was introduced to the tailor's trade due to his weak constitution. For future occupations he had a more than decent general education, learning Italian and French among other things.

Simon entered the Bethlehem Orphanage at a time when the work was at the height of its flourishing and when the fatherly presence of Fr Belloni was making everyone feel the effectiveness of his spiritual charm.¹⁰⁵

Here he remained for four years. Several elements suggest that, although educated in the Latin rite, he continued to have some external contact with his own rite and that this favoured the continuation of the spirit of his native rite.¹⁰⁶

Meanwhile, in 1891, Fr Belloni's institution passed to the Salesian Congregation, which continued its charitable mission.

¹⁰³ *Informatio*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ *Summ.*, 164.

¹⁰⁵ The atmosphere was poor, but joyful. Theatres, academies and awards ceremonies, walks, vocal and instrumental music were means of recreation and education together and made the Orphanage a pleasant centre of life, highly esteemed by Catholics and also by Orthodox and Muslims. Cf. G. SHALHUB 164ff.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Informatio*, 51.

1.2 At the Beitgemal orphanage: aspirantate and novitiate

Having discovered the signs of a religious vocation in the young Srugi, the Salesian superiors transferred him to the nearby Beitgemal Orphanage in 1892, which was also an aspirantate and novitiate house.

At school, Simon was serious, committed and an example to his classmates: from then on he was “perfect and exemplary in everything”.¹⁰⁷ The superiors chose him to lead prayer in church, for spiritual reading and as a helper in caring for the little ones, distinguishing himself in this with delicacy of touch and charity. He was called the Dominic Savio of Beitgemal. He was an active member of the Associations at the orphanage and thus learned to relate to his companions with the tact and spirit of apostolate which were then characteristic of his whole life.

Admitted to the novitiate at just over 15 years of age, he immediately manifested a concern to sanctify his work with ardent acts of love for God. Pumping water from the well into the basins, he made this resolution: “At each turn, an act of love for God, for the conversion of sinners.”¹⁰⁸

He made his first profession in the Salesian House in Cremisano on 31 October 1896 and his perpetual profession in Bethlehem on 20 September 1900.

1.3 An outline of his personality

At Beitgemal, Simon was sacristan, teacher and assistant to the boys at the orphanage, miller, nurse, tailor, worker in a small food shop. He was the kind of *coadiutore* Don Bosco wanted, the “*factotum*”, always ready and willing, capable of doing many things, self-sacrificing, with a goodness that fascinates, a lover of silence and recollection, all work and piety, at the service of the community. He was open and known by all for his great apostolic zeal.¹⁰⁹

He was a frail person, of medium height, with a thin, moderate voice. His dress was modest and poor, but clean and tidy. He had made a sort of uniform out of his suit, with his jacket fastened at the collar and the inevitable crucifix hanging from his neck. He had a deep gaze, lively black eyes, dominated by a continuous self-control. His smile and eyes won people over, a true expression of a soul that belonged completely to God.

He was habitually recollected and a lover of silence: when he answered he spoke calmly and serenely, after having reflected well. He was not physically strong, but his whole figure was a reflection of his intense inner life and the presence of God in him.

¹⁰⁷ *Summ.*, 274.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Informatio*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Informatio*, 73.

Simon Srugi's day unfolded between his practices of piety and his many occupations, switching from one to the other with ease: from his presence among the children to the clinic and the mill. He also found time to nourish himself spiritually by reading periodicals, books on asceticism and the lives of the saints.¹¹⁰

He loved community life very much and took care to be present at the various community moments of prayer, recreation, meals and all other activities. He was as punctual and exact as clockwork, as if at every moment he were obeying a call from God.

In the midst of the dramatic situations he experienced in Beitgemal, Simon always remained calm in the whirlwind of those events, encouraging others with his trust in the Lord and working to alleviate the hardships of the serious situation. The enormous prestige he enjoyed among the people made his interventions effective.

In the "question of the Arab confreres", which arose for reasons of nationalism, Simon Srugi also sought to be involved because of the great prestige he enjoyed in the province. He remained absolutely above all divisions, was always very attached to his superiors and to the Congregation and used his influence to promote peace among the confreres.

1.4 Friend of the young

Simon Srugi, despite his many occupations, regularly and willingly engaged with the young people of the orphanage. He loved them with great affection, especially because they were orphans; as if to make up for the fact that they were missing their parents. He always treated them with great kindness, but, as an educator, he did not lack a friendly firmness in correcting their faults.¹¹¹

He helped them with all their material needs and provided assistance: his presence always guaranteed order and joy in the environment. Naturally, his first concern was for souls.¹¹² His aspiration was that they live in God's grace and far from sin: this is why he was happy to prepare the little ones for First Communion, took part with the boys in all the religious ceremonies, edifying them by his example. He helped them to make visits, say the rosary, join in the Eucharistic Crusade.¹¹³ He was a true spiritual animator of the young.

His presence in the courtyard was particularly effective, always with an educational purpose. Because of his humility and simplicity, the young people approached him with great confidence. He rendered them many small services, such as sharpening pencils,

¹¹⁰ Cf. E. FORTI, *Un buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1967, 94.

¹¹¹ Cf. *Informatio*, 78.

¹¹²

¹¹³ eucharistic Crusade: a kind of youth group taken over from a non-Salesian group.

guiding the inexperienced to do some drawing, mending an item of clothing, preparing play equipment: and in the meantime he never missed an opportunity to say a good word, which had an infallible effect on the souls of the children. One of his pupils, who saw himself as being rather cheeky, said:

When Bro. Srugi was assisting, his scolding was fatherly advice, and his anger was just a friendly smile, and I went along with this kind and affectionate way he had. His goodness was such that one had to listen to him and love him. With his love for us young people he won our esteem, our souls and won over our our families.¹¹⁴

His presence alone ensured that unseemly and offensive words were avoided, but he did not fail to call out those who failed in this regard. He felt a great responsibility to help prevent evil and to lead the young people to do good. In his final years he would let himself be led to a chair at the edge of the courtyard to see the young people again, to be among them and to assist them.

For many years, he exercised the office of master of ceremonies, taking great joy in promoting the worship of the Lord. He called the boys in good time, instructed them carefully in the ceremonies, edified them by his recollected demeanour and his exhortations to piety.

The services, impeccably and fervently performed by Simon Srugi, were true schools of devotion and vocations.

1.5 Worker and apostle

He was a tireless worker and faithfully fulfilled his various occupations until he had to take to his bed, awaiting the rest he would have in Paradise.

He was calm and recollected, but always on the move, never wasting a minute, and the time when he was moving from one occupation to another was his only rest.¹¹⁵

Srugi's main occupation for many years was running the clinic, a providential work due to the shortage of health care in the region. He became a nurse out of a natural disposition to do good to bodies and souls. He learned by himself, studying diligently, but also through the help of an FMA sister who had a diploma in nursing and a doctor who came by from time to time to check on him in the clinic.

On fixed days he was at the clinic from 8am to 2pm. In the not infrequent cases of malaria and flu epidemics, the days were very tiring. There were many sick people, almost

¹¹⁴ *Summ.*, 205.

¹¹⁵

all Muslims, who came to him from far and wide. There was unlimited trust in him, even more than in doctors, so much so that the Muslims called him the “master”, the “doctor”.

The clinic was a daily testimony to his goodness, patient charity towards his neighbour, but especially towards the poor Muslims, towards the poor sick. He never showed annoyance, irritation to anyone or showed that he was upset: his touch was kindly, gentle, almost silent. He won people’s hearts with his true goodness of spirit, with the charity of Christ. He was truly like the Good Samaritan towards all the poor and the sick. His charity knew no pause or limit and he lavished it to the last ounce of his strength.¹¹⁶

It was a difficult job because of the number of people, the coarseness of the people, and because they often brought him desperate cases. He welcomed everyone, treated everyone with extreme kindness and patience, and sent everyone back happy: he was truly the “Good Samaritan” of the Gospel¹¹⁷ and he cured the sick by seeing Jesus himself in them.

Another job he had was the mill. People came to the Salesian mill, abandoning their primitive means of grinding. The machines had to be attended to and the people lined up, order had to be maintained, what they had entrusted to them for grinding had to be returned, and queries had to be settled. One could lose patience at any time with these people who were so prone to quarrelling. Srugi welcomed everyone with a smile, exquisite tact and charity: he was considered the father of all and the mill became a place of edification and catechesis.

Srugi sanctified his work with constant and fervent acts of prayer raised to God: “Jesus, Jesus!” he would say while preparing the needle for injections. “Jesus!” while treating a wound - “Praised be Jesus Christ”, “Long live Paradise!” were his usual expressions. On meeting someone his greeting was: “Long live Jesus, long live Mary!” And he wished to be greeted or answered in the same way. The Muslims had also learnt this greeting and addressed it to Srugi with veneration and religious feeling.

1.6 Final days

Bro. Srugi died at the age of 65, on 27 November 1943. Throughout his life he had ailments and serious illnesses: in the end he was consumed by fatigue and malaria. Already in 1941 he was in decline, but to those who advised him to rest, he replied: “Oh yes, I will rest in Paradise; just a little more... soon... I feel that I am at the end, but I will rest in Paradise.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Summ.*, 169.

¹¹⁷ This is the title established in the biography of the Servant of God by Ernesto Forti.

¹¹⁸ *Summ.*, 46.

He was very faithful to the end to the resolution he had written in 1934: “Never complain about anything that may happen to me, but suffer everything in silence out of love for Jesus my spouse.”¹¹⁹

His strength exhausted, as long as he could he would drag himself along to church and spend hours and hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament, or he would be taken out into the courtyard on a chair and enjoy watching the boys play. “Long live Jesus!” was his greeting to those who came to see him.

On 19 October 1943, at his own request, he received Holy Viaticum and on 24 October he was administered the Sacrament of the Sick; smiling, he responded with clarity and piety to the sacrament and all those who observed and accompanied him were edified. At the end of the service he said: “Now I can die in peace”.

He did not complain; he accepted with gratitude whatever was done for him. He suffered a lot, but with a smile on his lips he used to say: “The Lord Jesus suffered more”. One day, in a moment of crisis, he let slip: “It’s terrible when you can’t breathe”, but he immediately corrected himself: “No! No! The Lord wants it: it’s fine”.¹²⁰

On one of his last days, because he was so thirsty, he wished to have some ice to refresh himself. But shortly afterwards, he sent for the Rector and told him: “Don’t send anyone else for ice: Jesus suffered thirst on the Cross: I want to imitate him!”¹²¹

Death took him during the night of 27 November, without any agonising last moments, with no one at his side because he had sent back the nurse. He was in a serene attitude of prayer. He left this earth without disturbing anyone, as silent and humble as he had lived, for that “beautiful Paradise” to which he had aspired all his life.

Spirituality

Simon Srugi led a modest life, without great external events, all piety and work. He experienced everything alone and always for God, with a joyful spirit, without fatigue or failure, in circumstances that were always difficult and often dramatic. He never sought anything for himself, but devoted himself totally to the good of his neighbour.

His extraordinary holiness consisted in following the “little way” of love. He realised the heroism of sanctified daily life, and imitated, as a fellow citizen of Jesus, the heroic virtues of the life of the Holy Family. All his commitments were carried out as a Christian and religious with great fervour; with a visible and intense spiritual joy.

¹¹⁹ S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 25 agosto 1927*, in AIMOR, 1927. [Cf. Appendix 2, thought 441, 497].

¹²⁰ *Summ.*, 258.

¹²¹ *Summ.*, 253.

Every action in his life was animated by a supernatural intention; his union with God was uninterrupted; his Eucharistic and Marian fervour was very intense; his serenity of spirit was unalterable, even in difficult circumstances; he had perfect control over his passions. He abandoned himself to Providence with filial trust; he was totally available to others in whom he always saw Jesus; he was tireless in his efforts to do good; he showed patience that was greater than any opposition. His smile flourished perpetually on his lips and the behaviour of his humble person was composed and willing.¹²²

2.1 *Life in the Spirit of Jesus*

We share in divine life in the way we are children in the Son. Faith, hope and charity refer to the person of Jesus, to his eternal relationship with the Father. Therefore the profound experience of these three gifts of God (the theological virtues) are the best expression of the spiritual tension with which Srugi lived his constant conformity to the Son.

2.1.1 *Faith*

Simon Srugi had a living, deep and unalterable faith. It can be said that, like a righteous man, he lived by faith and expressed it in all the manifestations of his life: in piety, in his work, in his relations with others. It was said of him in Arabic: “Srugi is a man of God; God leads his hand; he is a prophet...”¹²³

Simon Srugi’s faith was manifested first of all in his union with God: this was his constant, profound and filial disposition. He prayed continually and prayed well, turning to God, the Virgin and St Joseph. His conversations, whoever he approached, were always on spiritual subjects or ended with at least one thought. He could always be heard praying, even loudly, with ardent invocations, in his room, around the courtyard, at the mill or at the clinic. His life was an affectionate contemplation of God and full adherence to his Will.¹²⁴

Many times during the day he would go to the chapel to pray, especially before and after work.

Until the last days of his illness he was very faithful to the common practices: he did not omit any, for any reason. For a long time he read out the meditation in the community, calm, devout, completely absorbed in the truth he was meditating on. He

¹²² Cf. *Positiones seu articuli*, in *Positio super virtutibus. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Simoneis Srugi Laici Professi Societatis Salesianae*, Rome, 1988, 13-15.

¹²³ *Summ.*, 23.

¹²⁴ Cf. *Summ.*, 22.

received communion daily and went to confession every Saturday. He gladly served the Eucharist with an edifying demeanour.

The Word of God was the object of special and devoted attention. He listened to it with keen interest in the chapel, remembered the smallest details, and talked about it during the week in conversations to edify those around him. If he did not understand something in the homily he would humbly ask the preacher for an explanation.¹²⁵

His zeal made Srugi a tireless apostle for the good of souls. He carried out the apostolate of witness first and foremost, and did not approach anyone without concern for bringing them to God. He made everyone feel a call to heavenly things, without ostentation, but also without fear. He addressed his invitations to the children at the orphanage, to the confreres, to those who came to the mill or to the clinic. To all he spoke of Jesus and Mary. The clinic and the mill were enveloped in the supernatural by his presence.

He also worked in the very difficult Muslim environment. He was respected by them not only for his goodness and skill as a nurse, but even more for the presence of God that they felt through him: and this unconsciously brought them closer to Christianity.

He felt an extraordinary joy every time he baptised a child, foreseeing, with great intuition, the death of the child. "I have saved a soul," he would exclaim, "I have sent a soul to Paradise".¹²⁶ Records show that there were certainly more than 360 baptisms of Muslim children.

It is thought that Srugi's spiritual action is also responsible for the many conversions and abjurations that the Salesians of Beitgemal have brought about through their apostolic presence.

His faith was manifested in a special way in the sanctification of the little things of daily life, in doing everything for God. His intentions, which were then faithfully practised, expressed the will not to commit the smallest venial sin, not to displease his superiors, not to complain about anything, to observe the Rule exactly... He was careful not to disturb his confreres, thoughtful in greeting and thanking them for every little thing, very kind in every contact, ready to do small favours, willing to accept remarks without reacting, absolutely silent about anything that could be to his own praise or merit. These were gestures of charity that flowed from a soul rich in the spirit of faith and the thought of God.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Cf. *Positiones seu articuli*, 19.

¹²⁶ *Positiones seu articuli*, 20-21.

¹²⁷ *Positiones seu articuli*, 21.

2.1.2 Hope

Hope in Simon Srugi shone through his unshakeable aspiration for heavenly goods and detachment from earthly things, his full abandonment to Divine Providence, his confidence in saving himself and saving souls by divine mercy.

Srugi walked this earth with his gaze and soul always turned towards Heaven: one would say he enjoyed its happiness in advance.¹²⁸

He was also an apostle of hope with his words and his whole spiritual attitude. The sick and the disheartened with life, whether Christian or Muslim, came to him, even if they were not cured, with the certainty that God, like a good Father, would not abandon them; in fact, they regained the strength and courage to face the difficulties of life and felt the joy of existence again. Those who approached him shared in his trust in the goodness of the Lord: to the dying above all he knew how to instil this serene abandonment in God.

I have never known anyone who was so familiar with Heaven as he was. It was the thought of Paradise that accompanied and guided him in all the circumstances of life, both in good and bad times. And he tactfully instilled this almost natural thought in all those who approached him, be they confreres, young people, the sick, workers or even Muslims, as many testimonies attest. How many times have we heard from him the phrase: "Paradise, Paradise!"¹²⁹

Christian hope made him always face the reality of death with serenity, in the absolute certainty of God's mercy and in the expectation of Paradise towards which he was striving with all the strength of his spirit.

2.1.3 Charity

The greatest proof of God's love is to do his will: Srugi had no other intention than this. He was most exact in his loving observance of the laws of God and the Church, and would not dispense with them for any reason. He was amiable, but adamant in this obedience.¹³⁰

He took the same care in observing the Rule of the Congregation, in which he saw the expression of God's will. His conformity to the Will of God was absolute, but spontaneous and joyful.

His love for God was revealed with a clarity that enchanted. He prayed at all times, went about his work, dealt with his neighbour: from all his behaviour, which was that of

¹²⁸ Cf. *Summ.*, 8.

¹²⁹ *Summ.*, 8.

¹³⁰ Cf. *Summ.*, 79-80.

a son towards his heavenly Father, it was clear that he loved God with all his heart, all his mind and all his soul.¹³¹

From love of God, charity towards one's neighbour flowed naturally for Simon. Throughout his life he never thought of himself, but did everything and always what was good for others, out of love for God.

His charity, in the modesty of his person and his occupations, was made up of understanding and kindness, infinite patience, complete self availability, spontaneous sacrifice, the unexpected refinement of a good heart, untiring service...

His charity was spiritual and material, towards Christians and non-Christians, towards those who loved him or those who insulted him. The law of charity was consistent with the law of forgiveness. There was no lack of those who insulted and beat him. "Jesus suffered more" was his usual phrase in these circumstances.¹³²

2.2 Moral life

Virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of the intelligence and will that regulate our actions, order our passions and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They provide ease, self-mastery and joy in leading a morally good life.¹³³ Srugi emerges as a virtuous man, moved by the desire to follow Christ radically, practising good freely as an expression of his docility to the Spirit, who animates him and drives him to a total gift of himself.

2.2.1 Prudence

Srugi showed supernatural prudence, knowing how to assess every situation well, even in the simplicity of his spirit, and for himself, he always knew how to choose God, the soul, Paradise, the concern to avoid sin, love of neighbour. He had a rich divine wisdom that guided him to see only and always people and events in the light of God.

¹³¹ Cf. *Informatio*, 173-175.

¹³² At Nazareth while going for a walk with a confrere he was mistaken for a Jew and became a victim of violence. He restricted himself to calming down the confrere who wanted to react and said: "Let's go. You can see that no one is liked in their own town. Jesus too was treated like this." *Summ.*, 128.

In 1938, when Fr Mario Rosin was killed, Srugi, in very dangerous guerilla circumstances, medicated the perpetrator of the crime and replied to those who marvelled at his gesture: "And must we not also love our enemies?" *Summ.*, 183. One day a Bedouin, whom he had not been able to satisfy, shouted at him: 'You are small: if I catch you I will kill you.' When he returned later to be treated, Srugi murmured: "You must be patient" and treated him.

¹³³ Cf. CCC, 1804.

His ardent missionary spirit drove him to work for the conversion of Muslims. The undertaking, arduous in itself, never discouraged him. In this, however, the Servant of God proceeded with great prudence, knowing well the environment in which he worked. One Muslim said: "He invited me to become a Christian, but without putting any pressure on me."¹³⁴

2.2.2 Justice

The servant of God was first and foremost just to God, to whom he paid everything and always what was due to him with a filial spirit. Everything was for God: prayer, work, his relations with others. He thanked him continually with the aspirations of his heart and the correspondence of his deeds.

"Jesus loved me so much that he suffered, died and gave himself up completely for me. I also want to suffer everything for his love, to love him and die for him."

His justice towards his neighbour was no less. He always knew how to find the good side in his confreres, in young people and in outsiders; he respected their good name and made it respected with friendly reminders. He often recalled the words of the Rector Major: "Let us think well of all, do good to all." He was never seen to do wrong, and if he happened to displease someone, he would humbly try to restore good relations.

He had a culture of gratitude and was grateful for every little favour done to him.¹³⁵

He was respected for his love of justice and for his righteousness. The peasants, Christians and Muslims, who came to the clinic or to the mill trusted the answers he gave. He was the "*taman*" man (righteous, perfect) and there was full confidence in his word and deed.¹³⁶

The confidence people had in his equanimity meant that he was often chosen as an arbitrator between disputants. He knew how to say the appropriate words that would encourage the cessation of violence, and more often than not the prestige of his presence was enough to make the disputants ready to agree.

The bloody quarrels in the villages brought him wounds to treat, and he treated the body then tried to bring peace to hearts. Frequent quarrels and thefts also took place at the clinic and the mill among coarse and not always good people. He would intervene to judge and everyone would defer: "Mu-allem Srugi has spoken" and that was enough: his sentence was final.

¹³⁴ *Positiones seu articuli*, 31.

¹³⁵ Cf. *Informatio*, 183-184.

¹³⁶ E. FORTI, *Un buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, 39.

2.2.3 Fortitude

Simon Srugi demonstrated heroism in the practice of fortitude first and foremost through the control he exercised over his character. He was always mild and gentle, direct in his actions, balanced and serene in spirit in all his judgements and decisions. He had much to work with and to suffer, his day was long and self-sacrificing and gave him occasion for endless bitterness: despite this, his smile never failed, he never ceased to speak of Heaven, conformity to God's will, trust in his goodness. Those who were close to him and his co-workers realised that this attitude cost him great effort and sacrifice, even though his character was naturally good...

Illnesses did not spare him. He suffered severe malarial fever, suffered a lot from toothache and had various other ailments. He endured it all without complaint, caring for himself as long as he could, and showing the joy of offering his sufferings to the Lord:

“When I think of the sufferings of the souls in Purgatory, everything seems easy and sweet to me. And we must also suffer something in expiation of our sins”¹³⁷ “Lord, You those who do You some service with some troubles. Oh, what an inestimable price this is for those who truly love you.”¹³⁸

Even on the most difficult and worrying occasions, Simon Srugi was never seen to make a gesture of spite, become angry, speak ill of anyone, use sarcasm or personal spite. Sometimes scolded by a confrere, he kept silent and waited for the storm to pass.

Similarly, in the difficult moments recounted in the history of Beitungal, in the midst of so much harassment, persecution and blackmail, Simon Srugi never lost his temper, managed to confront and curb the intemperance of the bandits and comforted his confreres.

2.2.4 Temperance

Srugi was extraordinarily temperate. It was said that he ate like a sparrow and there was no telling how he could sustain himself with all the work he did: he was constantly fasting.

He readily and resolutely eschewed all comforts, personal taste, refinement, and satisfactions that he could do without. His clothing was very modest, his room had the essentials for resting, he deprived himself of his fruit to give it to the sick, and he sacrificed sleep to assist those in need or to do some necessary work...¹³⁹

¹³⁷ *Summ.*, 82-83.

¹³⁸ *Positiones seu articuli*, 34.

¹³⁹ Cf. *Positiones seu articuli*, 36.

2.3 Religious vows

Simon Srugi was recognised as a perfect religious. His exemplary character is clear from the exact observance of his vows.

2.3.1 Poverty

Srugi was not only poor, he loved poverty and practised it in an exemplary manner. “When I possess God and his grace I am rich enough.”¹⁴⁰

He sought nothing for himself. With absolute detachment, he used only what was strictly necessary. He went as far as the nuances of poverty: “I will try to purify my soul by detaching myself from all earthly and material things to imitate Our Lord Jesus Christ who was very poor.”¹⁴¹

His trust was completely in Providence. “Providence, Providence, how good is Providence!”

Being in charge of the mill and the adjacent public shop, Srugi had to handle money out of necessity. For this reason he kept the registers in order, with crisp and clear handwriting. In the evening, he handed over all the proceeds to his superior, punctually and accurately. He knew how to demand the right price from those he had to pay, but he used all his skills to meet the needs of those who had special requirements.¹⁴²

2.3.2 Chastity

His behaviour was modest and reserved, he never uttered a word that was less than correct, and there was not a gesture of levity or excessive freedom that could tarnish his purity.

He was open and friendly in his dealings with young people and knew how to show them his interest and affection.

To preserve chastity he used the classical means of Christian asceticism: prayer, thinking of God’s presence, religious observance, vigilance and penance, avoidance of idleness.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ *Summ.*, 224.

¹⁴¹ S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 25 agosto 1927*, in AIMOR, 1927. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 434].

¹⁴² Cf. *Positiones seu articuli*, 38-39.

¹⁴³ Cf. *Informatio*, 191.

2.3.3 Obedience

He had a very high concept of obedience, in which he saw the will of God and the means of his own sanctification.

Everything we do out of obedience becomes gold. What the superiors command is the will of God. We have to be very shrewd, so that we don't let a chance pass without making merit for Paradise through obedience."¹⁴⁴ "One becomes a saint through obedience."¹⁴⁵

The superiors and the Rule were for him a living and concrete expression of God's will. His practical obedience to the dispositions of his superiors was filial, cheerful, indifferent to whatever occupation or order was given to him. When he saw a need, he would humbly present his opinion, but was then very ready to do what the superior told him.

The religious observance of the Rule was at the forefront of his thoughts. He was not scrupulous and formalistic, but exact down to the last detail, without ever dispensing with it, except when some greater force intervened. He considered the Rule, even in its smallest provisions, as the will of God and therefore as a means of perfection: he read it and meditated on it continuously, formulated his intentions on the Rule, renewed his religious profession every day...¹⁴⁶

He was as faithful and simple as a child in the practice of making his *rendiconto* to his superior. He followed the house timetable with the punctuality of a watch. "I shall be judged according to the observance of the holy Rule and the holy vows: therefore scrupulous observance."¹⁴⁷

2.4 Total gift of self and reputation for holiness

Srugi carried out his consecrated life and apostolic activity in Beitgemal for almost 50 years, simple, humble, tireless, without any pretension or complaint, completely focused on God and completely dedicated to doing good to others, sanctifying himself in the fulfilment of his humble daily duties.

"By becoming a religious, I gave myself entirely to my God, body and soul, and he willingly accepted me for his own. I will do everything for His greater glory."¹⁴⁸ His

¹⁴⁴ S. SRUGI, *Massime per i confratelli* 3, in AIMOR. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 407].

¹⁴⁵ *Summ.*, 155.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. *Informatio*, 192-193.

¹⁴⁷ S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 17 agosto 1931*, in AIMOR, 1931. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 472].

¹⁴⁸ S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 21 agosto 1938*, in AIMOR, 1938. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 532].

whole life was perfectly consistent with this purpose of generous self-giving that he had formulated in his youth.

Srugi enjoyed a reputation for holiness in life and after death. This is not a matter of general admiration, but of a true reputation for holiness, as confirmed by his Superiors, confreres, the sisters and former students. Blessed Fr Rua, who had met Simon on a visit to Beitgemal, told the confreres: "Follow up Brother Srugi, record his words and deeds, because he is a saint."¹⁴⁹

This was the general belief, even among Muslims who had the good fortune to meet him.

They unanimously affirmed that Srugi was a saint; they came to him not only because they trusted his profession as a nurse, but because he was respected as a "man of God". "Why do you come here from such a distance?" the sick were asked, "Are there not doctors and nurses at your place?" "Yes," they replied, "but they do not have the blessed hands of Bro. Srugi; he is a saint. In his hands is the perfection of God."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ *Positiones seu articuli*, 49.

¹⁵⁰ *Positiones seu articuli*, 49.

Chapter Four

A Reading of the Life of Simon Srugi and the Beitgemal Community In the Light of Faith

*“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,¹⁵¹
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens –
wakens my ear to listen
as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear
and I was not rebellious”
(Is 50:4-5)*

Memory needs to become biblical and spiritual. Biblical memory is the memory of the believer, those who read their own history and that of the world in the light of God’s interventions, in the style and manner described in the sacred books.

¹⁵¹ The term לומד can be translated as pupil, disciple, initiates, learners; these although synonymous, each one emphasises a different nuance. Pupil indicates someone who learns something from another; disciple adds vital value to this learning; initiates already indicates a first accomplished path in the existential understanding of the mystery (or Mystery), the most literal translation, accepting the neologism, would be “learners”. This emphasises (without losing the semantic richness of the other terms) the most intimate readiness to allow oneself to be guided. Note, the NRSV adds a note to ‘teacher’, saying that the Hebrew connotation is “those who are taught”. So I will use this (learner, one who is taught) as a synonym for disciple so as to give rise to the biblical resonance so as to underline this profound willingness to listen to the Mystery.

It becomes above all the *memory* of God, rather than simply the memory of human beings, as history written by Him and which the creature, or the believing community, knows, interprets or highlights. For authentic believers it is the Spirit who educates and animates this memory “[He] will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”¹⁵² “He will guide you into all the truth.”¹⁵³ He is the vital synthesis capable of producing spiritual memory because he is able to grasp the radical meaning of reality, filling all the paradoxical tensions of life with meaning. This is the way to become spiritual people, members of a community of intense spiritual life.

We could say that spiritual people are those who manage to grasp the radical meaning of reality, that which does not appear at first sight, but which animates reality and constitutes its soul, perceptible beyond the apparently different aspects of reality itself.

The spiritual man is free, he is not bound to the immediate and to the material; he can wander into other universes of meaning, he can open up to the transcendent and to mystery, he can give full breath and response to that irrepressible need for meaning and truth of the human mind, he can be continually present to his life, to the present as well as to the past...¹⁵⁴

The spiritual, in particular, should not be understood as that which is opposed to the material, but as a symbol of the relational: if spiritual, in fact, derives from Spirit, the Spirit in the Trinity is above all relation, communication, listening and dialogue, love, living with differences, common ground of encounter between different polarities... for this reason a spiritual community is a relational community, a community that can enter into deep contact with reality, especially of the interpersonal kind, respects the peculiarity and difference of the other and takes up its call, allows itself to be provoked by the relationships that establish its own history.

It is the same Spirit that accompanies us in accepting the richness and poverty of our own unique and unrepeatably history, provoking first of all the healing of memory and initiating reconciliation with our own past in an integration of it, without cutting anything out or victimisation, gathering all the precious contributions of experience.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Jn 14:26.

¹⁵³ Jn 16:13.

¹⁵⁴ A. CENCINI, *L'albero della vita*, 208.

¹⁵⁵ The members of a spiritual community are responsible for their lives, for others, for themselves, for the gifts they have received from God, for his presence manifested in the days of their lives, but above all they are responsible to God for the history that God has "written" in their past and that continues in the present. A spiritual community knows... how to read and write, it is not illiterate, is able to recognise the mysterious writing of God manifested in its own history. It deciphers it continuously, scrutinises its profound meaning, grasps it in the past, "already written", but constantly interprets it in the present, like a voice whose echo it hears in a continuous synthesis that has the dense flavour of prayer and contemplation, as the place and manner of this believing exercise. Cf. A. CENCINI, *L'albero della vita* 208-209.

It is the acceptance of the Spirit that enables us to become spiritual beings with a paschal conscience, free to grasp ever more fully and deeply the meaning of our own experiences, but also to modify, at least to a certain extent, our responses to the events of life and death; to give a paschal dimension to the experience of evil suffered, to soften the impact and violence of any suffering or failure, to discover the positive in the negative.

Being truly spiritual and paschal people enables us to reinterpret our history in the light of faith and thus to be present in our life at every moment of it, not because we are outside of time, but precisely because we are responsible for our history. This is the exercise that we now propose to complete in the story of Beitgemal recounted in the previous chapters.

1. Disciples at Beitgemal

Salesians are called by vocation to live as disciples of the Lord.¹⁵⁶ It is thanks to the gift of the Father's call, to follow Jesus Christ more closely, that, with the gift of his Spirit, the sons of Don Bosco are sent to be apostles of the young, educators in the faith.

This logic of "first disciples then apostles", or even better "apostles because disciples", is established by God at the beginning of the history of salvation and more clearly since the beginning of the Church.

Even the Twelve, before being chosen as apostles, were disciples, that is, they followed Jesus and learned from him. In reality, they would not have been able to carry out their missionary function and activity if they had not been authentic followers of Christ, if in him they too had not become children of the Father, in an ongoing and never-ending journey of configuring their own feelings to those of the Son.

Discipleship in fact consists of a tenacious commitment to follow the Master every day of one's life. The apostles were able to make disciples of the nations because they were first authentic disciples of Jesus, especially after the descent of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁷

In a careful interpretation of the history of Beitgemal we can glimpse this logic of discipleship, that is, "teachers in the faith because disciples in the faith", but not only that, it also allows us to perceive some identifying elements of being disciples of the Lord as Salesians in the Middle East.

a. *Discipleship*: because the Salesians in Beitgemal are first and foremost baptised. In fact, it is in the journey of becoming true disciples that the essence and deepest identity of

¹⁵⁶ C. 3

¹⁵⁷ S. PANIMOLLE, *Inviati nel mondo ad annunziare l'amore salvifico di Dio per rendere discepoli a tutta la genti*, in ID. (eds), *Apostolo discepolo missione 4. Dizionario di spiritualità biblico-patristica*, Rome, Borla, 1993, 11

Christians is at stake. “The absolute of man is the Kingdom; and the disciple is the one for whom this is the dominant affirmation, like the horizon in which life is placed, developed and questioned.”¹⁵⁸ And all this while being aware that the Kingdom is concretely given and present in Jesus Christ. Then the disciple essentially knows that the centre is not himself, but that the person is realised, indeed exists, only in Christ.

This is radical obedience, the obedience of faith. When we say that the disciple is the one who obeys Jesus Christ, radical obedience is this.

I do not give myself the boundaries I want, because these are not the boundaries of truth, they are not the boundaries of justice, of goodness. I must take the boundaries, I must take the shape from Jesus Christ.

This at times appears to us as foolishness. But wisdom is taking the boundaries of Jesus Christ, even though it may be a great crucifixion for us, because the boundaries we ourselves have are not those of Jesus Christ, but of Adam.

The Christian’s truest cross consists in being a disciple. It consists in this obedience, whereby we learn to say: “I am not the truth and neither is being human.” We accept that the being human is the truth, the good; but the wisdom of faith tells us that the being human is not the truth, the good. The truth, the good is a concrete human being: it is the concrete humanity of Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁹

b. *Discipleship*: because the Salesians at Beitgemal are indeed Salesians. Don Bosco also warned that the main aim of becoming a Salesian should be the salvation of one’s soul; clearly the Salesian charism proposes this through service to the smallest and poorest. If we put Don Bosco’s ecclesial theological mentality into practice this “salvation of one’s soul” means nothing other than welcoming the Father’s call, in the Spirit, to follow Jesus in order to become, throughout one’s history, sons in the Son. Salesians are called to become educators in the faith, precisely because their deepest identity is to be “learners” in the faith.

c. *Discipleship*: because the Salesians at Beitgemal live and work in the context of the Middle East. The high esteem that the mentality of Middle Eastern societies has for “men of God” gives rise to a great spiritual and formation challenge. Starting with the local confreres who have had to learn to manage this social growth as a means of placing themselves at the service of God and his Kingdom and not for personal benefit or whims. Maintaining the consciousness of being first and foremost a disciple becomes difficult where the mentality considers you superior: master. But this vital attitude of “learning” is the strongest message that the Arab confreres have been able to proclaim with their lives.

¹⁵⁸ G. MOIOLI, *Il discepolo*, Milan, Glossa, 2000, 12.

¹⁵⁹ G. MOIOLI, *Il discepolo*, 13.

d. *Discipleship*: because the missionary confreres also faced a similar challenge as they were called to bring the Good News and had to immerse themselves in the logic of the Incarnation (to be representatives of God's love and not of their countries, cultures, or of themselves).¹⁶⁰ Living according to the criteria of the Incarnation requires a continuous *kenosis* that can only find its source, its sustenance and its destination in Christ.

e. *Discipleship*: because this is the strongest testimony offered by Simon Srugi. Prayer in him was the fruit of an awareness of God's greatness that he realised in his smallness. Among his abundant virtues, what stood out in Srugi was humility; in fact, we could see his desire to work in silence, hidden, all under exemplary obedience. In character and physique he appeared as one of low rank, one made not to command or teach but, on the contrary, to obey and learn. And here is the paradox: he, who identified himself as a permanent "learner" (disciple) was recognised, and is remembered also by Muslims, with the title of "*muaallem* Srugi" that is, "master/teacher Srugi". This is the emphasis Simon Srugi offers to the Salesian spiritual heritage: one can only become a teacher of the young in the faith if one lives deeply as a disciple in the faith.

We would now like to highlight some fundamental elements of this discipleship experience lived in Beitgemal. A discipleship centred in Jesus and his Gospel, a discipleship lived in the Church, a discipleship with a spiritual imprint and method proper to the Salesian charism and, finally, a discipleship that illuminates daily life and is measured against and enriched by it.

1.1 *Disciples of Christ and his Gospel*

"To be a true disciple of Jesus"¹⁶¹ is what Simon Srugi proposed in his spiritual programmes. This purpose resonates with the deep conviction of the major players in the Beitgemal story. It seems obvious to say, but it is really Jesus, and the following that he inspires, that we find at the basis of all the expressions of generous charity and spirit of sacrifice of Fr Belloni, Bro. Angelo Bormida, Fr Eugenio Bianchi, Fr Mario Rosin and Bro. Simon Srugi.

Jesus is the beginning¹⁶² of existence, of the Church, of consecrated life,¹⁶³ of the

¹⁶⁰ In fact, it is also true that the missionary confrere brings with him, in addition to his personal gifts, a cultural, pastoral, charismatic wealth taken from the culture and province of origin that he is called to share. Therefore, not infrequently, the missionary is convinced that he arrives in the province to "bring", to "give", to "work", to "educate and evangelise", to "save" with the danger of forgetting that his first mission is to grow in the Lord, and do this in the culture and history of the society and the province where he arrives, God is already present, therefore they are "holy ground" where one must enter with the greatest respect, "taking off one's shoes". To tell the truth, in following the Lord it is much more what the missionary is called to learn than what he is called to teach (apart from language and the rest of the cultural components).

¹⁶¹ S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 25 agosto 1927*, in AIMOR, 1927. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 428].

¹⁶² Cf. *Jn* 1:1.

Salesian charism.¹⁶⁴

Our Salesians did not follow a virtue (obedience, poverty, chastity) or an activity (the education of orphans, the mission among the Muslims, etc.), but followed a Person whom they wanted to imitate in his fullness and a Gospel which they wanted to live in its totality.

Imitating Christ means looking to him as a model, it means remembering that the path to sanctification to which one is called as a Salesian¹⁶⁵ is a journey of "Christification"¹⁶⁶ To the point of being united with Him as St Paul says: "It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me."¹⁶⁷ This is the deep meaning of Simon Srugi's resolutions: "I want to deny myself, my vanities, my pride, my whims and my comforts, and carry my daily cross to be a true disciple of Jesus."¹⁶⁸

This configuration to Christ is expressed in day-to-day experience, but it can open the heart to the point of total self-surrender in merciful love; this was the experience of Bro. Angelo Bormida who felt he was a disciple of the Lord even in his death throes: "It

¹⁶³ In the beginning there is Jesus, with his attraction, preaching the Kingdom of God and inviting people to conversion (*Mk* 1:15): Then immediately after there is Jesus who calls some – the Twelve (*Mk* 1:16-20) – to follow him, to "stay with him" to learn how he lives. He invites them to leave everything: trade, tradition, goods, family, a planned future. "And they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him" (*Mk* 1:20).

Two kinds of discipleship formed around Jesus, two ways of following him:

- Most lived their conversion to the Kingdom in their family and professional life;

- Instead a small group was called by the Lord to stay with him, leaving family and profession: "*He called to him those whom he wanted and they came to him*" (*Mk* 3, 13-14). This is the group of those who could say with Peter: "*Look, we have left everything and followed you*" (*Mt* 19:27).

The group of those who leave everything receive the following two tasks:

The first task: "stay with Jesus in a particular relationship with him. Jesus wants a group of Israelites at his side, so that they can participate in his way of life, in his way of being, which says total dedication to the Father and to their brothers and sisters. It is a question – according to a felicitous expression of Vatican II, later taken up by the following documents – of "following Christ more closely";

The second task: proclaiming the Good News and spreading the kingdom of God. He called them – Mark says – "to proclaim the message and to have authority to cast out demons" (*Mk* 3:15).

After announcing the Kingdom to all, calling them to follow him in his conversion, Jesus chooses the Twelve first of all so that they may learn to live with him and like him, and then so that they may act like him and in his name.

¹⁶⁴ The spirit of Don Bosco "not without a special disposition from God, draws its original nature and strength from the Gospel" Cf. PAUL VI, *Motu proprio Magistraioon vitae* 24 May 1973 with which he raised the Salesian Atheneum to the status of a University, in AGC 54 (1973) 272, 77.

In order to understand the Salesian spirit in its central element, we need to go beyond the person of Don Bosco. We need to go to the Source from which he drew: the very person of Christ, his "Heart", that is to say Christ insofar as he is the full revelation of divine Charity.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. C 25.

¹⁶⁶ *Eph* 4:19.

¹⁶⁷ *Gal* 2:20.

¹⁶⁸ S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 25 agosto 1927*, in AIMOR, 1927. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 28].

is nothing; our Lord was also scourged and abused. The only grace I ask of him is that of helping me to bear everything with patience, until the end.”¹⁶⁹

But to achieve this identification with the Master, we need a life of familiarity with Him. This is the testimony of Fr Eugenio Bianchi’s life, for whom Jesus had become an ever-present friend; indeed the Friend with whom he had a very tender, confidential conversation throughout his tiring day. Fr Eugenio expressed this profound relationship with a very tender devotion to the Name of Jesus and the fragrance spread everywhere; but his favourite disciple, Simon Srugi, surpassed his master, so as to become truly the “Jesus’ Cantor”.¹⁷⁰

“Long live Jesus in our hearts, in our souls, in our works, in our life and in our death.”¹⁷¹ This is what Simon Srugi used to say to etch into the tender minds of the orphans of Beitgemal the memory of the divine Master and his secret divinising action in their souls.

Disciples, always disciples. This awareness opened our Salesians to true humility and sincere recognition of the greatness of Jesus Christ, the only Master. In this sense, what happened with Fr Belloni and the origin of the procession of the Blessed Sacrament in Bethlehem is emblematic; highly significant for its spiritual depth but also for its apostolic fruitfulness:

Everyone had sung the praises of Fr Belloni, but the holy man, in his closing speech at the academy, felt the need to correct many words on the subject.

“I am a poor man,” concluded the good Father with great humility; “it is the Lord Jesus Christ who has done it. To him alone, therefore, honour and glory. We must thank him. Indeed, I want us to do so publicly and solemnly. For the feast of the Sacred Heart we will hold a procession with the Blessed Sacrament through the streets of the city.”

When Fr Belloni wanted something, not even the Turkish government could win. In fact, the procession marched composedly and devoutly through the streets of Bethlehem, which followed the triumph of the Saviour in the monsternace with great joy.

From that day onwards (...) the beautiful ceremony never ceased. On the contrary, the circuit was enlarged and, year after year, the participation of the faithful and the clergy

¹⁶⁹ E. FORTI, *Fedeli a don Bosco in Terra Santa*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1988, 38.

¹⁷⁰ “Srugi’s greeting was ‘Long live Jesus’ and he said it smiling as if he had honey in his mouth. (...) He pronounced it with pleasure, with love, with devotion, respectfully removing his cap. (...) He repeated: Long live Jesus! Long live Mary! up to three times in succession, and he would say it with such devotion that it seemed as if he had been taken over by a great joy. His face, when he said that greeting, seemed to me to be almost transfigured and his soul all in Heaven”. E. FORTI, *Il buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, 154.

¹⁷¹ E. FORTI, *Il buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, 155.

became more numerous, so as to make it the most solemn Eucharistic procession in all Palestine.¹⁷²

1.2 *Disciples in the Church*

“Our love for Christ necessarily gives rise to our love for his Church, the People of God, the centre of unity and communion of all the forces working for the Kingdom.”¹⁷³

In the mystery of the Church the same mystery of God the Father who loves all, of the Son who redeems, of the Spirit who sanctifies, is present and at work. From the heart of the Church comes a pastoral energy that makes her a sacrament of unity:

“it pleased God to call men to share His life, not just singly, apart from any mutual bond, but rather to mould them into a people in which His sons, once scattered abroad might be gathered together.”¹⁷⁴ It also makes it “a universal sacrament of salvation, simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God’s love.”¹⁷⁵

One of the characteristics of the Salesian spirit is precisely that of “*ecclesiality*”:

This is true without any doubt of the universal Church, both in respect of its sacramental nature, as a sign and efficacious means of salvation, as also of its ministry of communion between the various vocations, charismata and ministries, and as regards the mission it carries out in the world; but it is true as well of the particular Churches, i.e. the local Churches in which we find ourselves inserted in practice.¹⁷⁶

The history of Beitgemal illustrates two very particular aspects of this following of Christ in the Church; they are the relationship with the hierarchy and the communion with the clergy and other religious orders.

1.2.1 *Relationship with the hierarchy*

As our historical survey shows, there has always been a good relationship between the Salesian community of Beitgemal and the pastors of the Church, especially the Latin Patriarchate to which the community belongs. Patriarchs and Bishops visited the orphanage in Beitgemal many times, and these visits were a real pleasure for the distinguished guests and all the members of the work. For quite a while the visits became

¹⁷² E. FORTI, *Fedeli a don Bosco in Terra Santa*, 27.

¹⁷³ C 13.

¹⁷⁴ AG 3.

¹⁷⁵ GS 45; Cf. LG 48.

¹⁷⁶ *Project of life of the Salesians*, 130.

regular, prompting a traditional programme of affectionate interchange between the Patriarch, the community and the orphans.

In their relationships with the ecclesiastical authorities – Patriarchs, Apostolic Delegates, Bishops, etc. – who often had to juggle with Rome and the civil authorities, the Salesians tried to practise the wise advice given by Don Bosco to the first missionaries, and which Fr Rua formulated for the Middle East in the person of its first Provincial: “Do what you can to get into the good graces of the Patriarch and the clergy of the Patriarchate.[...] With the Patriarch it is better to proceed quite broadmindedly.” And Fr Nai was able to practise this advice so well that, two years later, he could confide to Fr Barberis: “The Patriarch loves me like a brother...”^{177,2178}

The Patriarchs showed confidence in the Salesians in Beitgemal by entrusting them with the pastoral care of the Christians living in the surrounding area,¹⁷⁹ also the pastoral care of the religious communities in Rafat, and other required services (such as caring for the children of Jewish-Christian families who arrived from Poland after the war). The Salesians showed themselves to be responsible and generous with these commitments, even though they had to invest a great deal of money, time, effort and even their lives in fulfilling them.

On the other hand, the Salesians also turned to their pastors with confidence, when they thought that the latter could help them in their various needs. And many times they were welcomed and their needs granted.

Two issues gave rise to tensions between the hierarchy and the Salesians: the ownership of the works that belonged to Fr Belloni and the management of the Salesians’ pastoral and vocational activities in relation to the Apostolic Letter *Orientalium Dignitas*.

1.2.1.1 *The Bellonian Work’s properties*

With respect to property, one has to go back to the beginning, when the union between Fr Belloni’s religious family and the Salesians had just come fully into force in legal terms:

Fr Rua called the change in the Patriarch’s attitude after he returned from Rome a “painful surprise”¹⁸⁰ and attributed it “probably” to certain people “who had urged the archbishop that property belonging to the Bellonian Work remained with the Patriarchate.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ *Lettere di don Rua a don Nai*, in ASC 9.131 *Rua M.*, 12.10.1902 and 28.11.1902. *Lettera di don Nai a don Barberis G.*, in ASC 275 *Nai L.*, 10.1.1904.

¹⁷⁸ J. BORREGO, *I salesiani in Medio Oriente*, 26.

¹⁷⁹ In fact, Beitgemal was the only parish that the Salesians took over in the first 50 years of the province’s history.

¹⁸⁰ *Lettera (draft) senza data (undated) di D. Rua a Propaganda*, in ASC 38 *Betlemme, Conv. B-R*.

¹⁸¹ G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama*, 132; J. POLACEK, *I salesiani di don Bosco e le figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nella Palestina, specialmente tra il 1891 e il 1910*, Rome, Archivio PIO, 1976, 83.

The Patriarch, considering the assets of the Holy Family Work to be property of common ecclesiastical law, and therefore of the diocese of Jerusalem, and as such not convertible into private property, imposed clauses for their administrative protection.

Fr Belloni, both verbally and in writing, demonstrated to him his independence from the Patriarchate, declared “formally” by Bishop Valerga; he sent him a copy of the Agreement with the Salesians, letting him know that he had already taken his vows in their Congregation, and that, with much regret, neither he nor the representative of the Salesians could accept the conditions he had set.¹⁸²

In response, Archbishop Piavi suspended all subsidies to the Orphanage from the beginning of 1891, and decided to deprive Fr Belloni of the title of canon. Belloni confessed that in his heart he took a certain pleasure in this.¹⁸³

The matter needed to be passed on to Propaganda Fide.¹⁸⁴ This body imposed heavy conditions on the Salesian superiors.¹⁸⁵ Fr Rua’s reply was clear: having carefully examined the matter, despite his full willingness to comply with the Patriarch’s wishes in everything, he could not accept these conditions, and the Salesians were “obliged, albeit very reluctantly, to abandon the position they had taken [i.e. to withdraw from Fr Belloni’s works]”.¹⁸⁶

The Prefecture of Propaganda Fide responded with some serious accusations against the Congregation; Fr Rua took the opportunity, in a retrospective view of the whole affair, to reaffirm that “the Pious Society has no other aim than to do good, and this always in full agreement with the Apostolic See, as our unforgettable founder and father Don Bosco taught us”; and he advanced the well-founded suspicion “that some misunderstanding has occurred in this affair”.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Lettera di Mons. Piavi a D. Belloni, in ASC 38 *Betlemme, Conv. B-R*, 5.7.1892; *Lettere di D. Belloni a mons. Piavi*, in ASC 38 *Betlemme, Conv. B-R*, 3 and 9.7.1891

¹⁸³ Cf. *Lettere di D. Belloni a D. Barberis*, in ASC 275 Belloni, 2-9-1981, 23.12.1891, 2.2.1892.

¹⁸⁴ The latter asked Fr Belloni to draw up, together with the Patriarch, a new Agreement concerning the aggregation of his Work to the Salesians, with the definitive approval of Rome. Fr Belloni, fearing that unacceptable conditions would be imposed on the Salesians, persuaded Cardinal Simeoni that “several ill-informed persons were trying to force the Salesians to withdraw”, which would lead to the ruin of his Work.

¹⁸⁵ The Prefect of Propaganda replied with a letter to Fr Rua in which he specified the tough conditions of the aggregation: the property of the Bellonian Work always belonged to the diocese of Jerusalem; the main aim had to be the education of the poor youth of Palestine, with preference for those of the patriarchal diocese; the collections in favour of the orphanage were to be made with the previous permission of Propaganda, to whom the amount collected had to be accounted for annually; and finally the Work remained under the protection of the French government.

¹⁸⁶ *Lettera del card. Simeoni a D. Rua*, in ASC 38 *Betlemme, Conv. B-R*, 23.9.1891. There are two letters of reply, one of five, the other of fifteen pages, undated. The first is undoubtedly the final text, carefully elaborated, while the second is the draft. The latter is signed by the “Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr Michael Rua”.

¹⁸⁷ *Lettere di D. Rua al card. Ledochowski*, in ASC 38 *Betlemme, Conv. B-R*, 31.3 and 6.4.1892.

The Superior Chapter decided to withdraw the Salesians from Palestine, on the advice of the Holy Father. Fr Durando communicated this to Fr Belloni. Belloni, in holy despair, wrote a strong letter to Propaganda Fide on 20 November 1892, in which, after clarifying what could be done, he begged them to reach an agreement with the Salesians as soon as possible that would allow them to continue working “for the spiritual and temporal good of the orphans of Palestine”, otherwise he would be obliged to abandon the Work altogether.

Fr Belloni also had personal correspondence with the Patriarch, who finally changed his attitude. He showed himself so well disposed towards the sons of Don Bosco – even if at a high price – that at the end of 1892 he wrote to Propaganda in their favour. In conclusion, the Prefect of Propaganda, seeing that things were not “as he believed” – as he wrote – “withdrew the recent dispositions [...] and referred everything to the prudence of the Patriarch”, who assured Fr Belloni that he felt very happy to authorise the Salesians to remain in Bethlehem, Cremisan and Beitgemal.

Throughout this whole affair, it was certainly Fr Belloni’s decisive approach that upset the Patriarch and pushed him to find a more benevolent agreement.

1.2.1.2 *Apostolic Letter Orientalium Dignitas*

This is a fundamental document for apostolic missionary activity in the Middle East, and therefore also for the work carried out by the Salesians in Beitgemal. The Latin institutions that worked among the Orientals felt they were being reminded of something by Rome in some of its paragraphs. The document had its origins in the Eucharistic Congress of Jerusalem, celebrated the very year of the arrival of the Salesians. The *Bollettino Salesiano* spoke widely of it.¹⁸⁸ In this article we find for the first time the word “brothers” applied to the Orthodox: the Salesians gradually attuned themselves, not without uncertainty, to the new orientation of the Catholic Church, of which the Eucharistic Congress was a clear expression.

The concrete and immediate result was the patriarchal conferences held in the Vatican in October 1894, which led to Leo XIII’s Apostolic Letter *Orientalium dignitas*

¹⁸⁸ “Since the Crusades, Jerusalem has never seen such a great display of faith. It was the two Churches, that of the East and that of the West, which, with the multiplicity of rites they manifest, joined strongly together to give a sublime testimony of faith and love to the Holy Eucharist, under the guidance of the Representative of the Pope, Vicar of Jesus Christ, their Founder and Head. [...] And to make this demonstration [...] not only the various rites of united Christendom contributed, but also our schismatic brothers [...]. The Greek Patriarch, the Armenian Bishop and the Coptic dissidents, receiving the invitation of the President of the Congress, gave him a warm welcome. [...] May God be adored in this Sacrament of love to really open the eyes of these brothers of ours, draw them out of their prejudices and guide them into union with the Roman Church”. *Il Congresso Eucaristico di Gerusalemme*, in *Bollettino Salesiano* 17 (1893) 1255.

Ecclesiarum of 30 November, which is considered “the Magna Carta of relations between East and West, and the best that the most demanding champions of Eastern autonomy could wish for”.¹⁸⁹

Salesian activity was immediately interested in the articles:

1- threatening suspension *a divinis* and exclusion from office of the Latin missionary who “educates some Oriental people to change to the Latin rite”;

3- that in the Latin schools of the East pupils of the Eastern rite should have a priest of the same rite for Mass and catechesis in their own language, for the explanation of their own rite, and all this at least on Sundays and holy days, ensuring that day students participate in their own rite;

10- prohibiting the reception of Orientals of both sexes into a Latin Order or Institute without the testimonial letters of their Ordinary.

But in the face of the reality of the work in Beitgemal – with pupils of different rites – despite the desire for prompt obedience to the Pope, it was not known what to do, because the decree ordered that for every 25 individuals resident in an Institute, there should be a priest of their rite, but the Salesian Society did not have any, there was no money to pay them, and experiments to bring them in as outside teachers had not been successful.

Then how could we have had Salesians of oriental rites, to educate the students in their own rite, if there were so many difficulties in accepting young people of oriental rites into the Congregation?

The Salesians therefore wondered whether, in this case, it would not be licit to more easily accept, first as novices and then to admit to perpetual profession, young men of the Eastern rite in order to have priests of that rite.

In fact – according to the chronicle – seven Salesian vocations of Eastern rite came from the house at Beitgemal. But it was not easy to manage all the arrangements (to tell the truth, also because it required a mentality of ritual ecumenism to which many were not accustomed).

We can see how the chronicles of the time report the concrete difficulties of implementing all the rules despite the good will to follow the spirit in which they were enacted:

Among the teachers of Arabic we have here a young man of about 25 who was already a pupil of Fr Belloni's, a Maronite Catholic, and whom I would accept as an aspirant. Now, while he is at school, he would like to study to embrace the ecclesiastical life and

¹⁸⁹ ASS XXVII (1894-95) 257-264.

later become a Salesian. But since he is a Maronite, I would like you [Fr Durando] to tell me if he can learn Latin, do his philosophical and theological studies in Latin and become a Salesian *by changing from the Maronite rite to the Latin rite*, or is it necessary that he remain in his rite, studying philosophy and theology in Arabic. If the latter is the case, please tell me how we should proceed.¹⁹⁰

In fact, from 1901 onwards there had been a succession of requests from Salesians of the Eastern rite to change to the Latin rite, but not before the novitiate, but after temporary or perpetual profession. Propaganda intervened on 23 December 1903 disapproving of this custom and inviting Fr Rua to recommend to Salesian missionaries the exact observance of the Apostolic Constitutions.¹⁹¹ Fr Albera would give Fr Gatti precise rules:

For Orientals, in addition to the papers required to be admitted to the novitiate, a dispensation to change to the Latin rite is also required; when they are postulants, therefore, and it is hoped that they will apply for the novitiate, they should begin to do the paperwork.¹⁹²

In the Central Archives of the Congregation there is a brief correspondence with Propaganda Fide (1904–05) aimed at remedying the irregularities committed in the matters of the passage to the Latin rite. From the document itself it can be seen that the majority of the native Salesians came from the various Eastern rites and that the *sanatio* through correspondence was not an easy matter and took its time, because Propaganda studied each case carefully.

One after the other, all the postulants of the Eastern rite asked to change to the Latin rite, so that in 1915 the Provincial Fr Sutera announced to Fr Gusmano: “We only have the Latin rite in the Congregation”.¹⁹³

Only this way did they end up fulfilling all the precise rules, but moving away from the original spirit of *Orientalium Dignitas*; because committed to resolving processes that expressed respect for the Eastern Churches, the “Latin” identity was sidelined and the desire for inculturation in the environment of Eastern rites was watered down.

¹⁹⁰ Lettera di D. Cardano a D. Durando, in ASC 38 *Beitgemal*, 5.11.1901.

¹⁹¹ Lettera del Segretario di Prop. Fide per gli Affari dei Riti Orientali, mons. Savelli-Spinola, a D. Rua, in ASC 31.42. *MO Relaz. Aut. Eccl.*, 21.12.1902.

¹⁹² Lettera di D. Albera a D. Gatti, ASC 38 *Betlemme*, undated.

¹⁹³ Lettera di D. Sutera a D. Gusmano, in ASC 31.22 *Corrisp. Coi Capit.*, 4.6.1915. People kept asking for permission to change to the Latin rite, and on one occasion Fr Sutera came out with that revealing expression.

1.2.1.3 Summary

To be a disciple of Jesus in the Church demands that we take on the effort to grow by constantly addressing the tensions between charism and institution, love and justice, prophecy and tradition, truth and dialogue. History shows that this is not easy. It often seems that the human dimension pollutes the divine institution too much. But Christ took on human nature, and from it and with it he wants to redeem us. If the incarnation was a continuous *Kenosis* for Christ, then it will certainly be no different for the disciples.

Certainly the desire to live in communion with the Pastors of the Church has helped us to deal with the misunderstandings that have arisen in a mature Christian way. But even in this case Don Bosco's exhortation remains fully valid: "*Any effort is little when it comes to the Church and the Papacy.*"¹⁹⁴

1.2.2 Communion with the clergy and other religious congregations

"Love, fear, respect other religious orders and always speak well of them. This is the way to make everyone respect you and to promote the good of the Congregation." This was the tenth piece of advice given by Don Bosco to the first Salesian missionaries.

The Salesians have received a particular sensitivity from Don Bosco for that aspect of the Church which is its capacity to build "unity and communion among all the forces working for the Kingdom". In the Salesian view the Church is seen as the People of God, a mystery of "communion" of all its members, an active communion, a dynamic centre placed at the service of unity among all the forces (people of good will) that silently work in the world for the good of their brothers and sisters.

This attitude was fully in line with Fr Belloni's ecclesial sensitivity. Belloni was nicknamed "the friend of all religious",¹⁹⁵ as he was repeatedly able to demonstrate:

When the De La Salle Brothers arrived in Palestine, Fr Belloni hastened to welcome them and, beaming with joy, offered his services, thanked the Lord for having sent them to do good in those lands, gave them useful information on the environment and encouraged them to set to work immediately.

These sentiments and broadmindedness, which are the flower of charity, could not leave indifferent those who were its immediate object. ...[Their superior] Brother Evagre remained a faithful friend, the enthusiastic admirer throughout Father Belloni's life; he visited him often and there was no feast where he did not attend.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ G.B. LEMOYNE, *Memorie Biografiche di don Giovanni Bosco* V, S. Benigno Canavese-Torino, SEI, 1904, 577.

¹⁹⁵ G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama*, 57-60.

¹⁹⁶ G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama*, 58.

The Assumptionists and the Lazarists [Vincentians] were edified and won over by the affectionate care that the good Father had for them in the first months of their arrival and remained very attached to his work.¹⁹⁷ Abuliatama was especially deferential to the Franciscan Fathers, the intrepid guardians of the holy places, and had respect and veneration for them.¹⁹⁸

Fr Antonio Varaia, the first Salesian Rector of Beitgemal, was also famous for his selfless service in the spiritual direction of religious communities in Palestine. In fact this is the interpretation given to a dream of Don Bosco's in which he saw the priest Varaia occupied in a great work outside the circle of the Congregation.¹⁹⁹

The relationship of friendship established between Brother Angelo Bormida and the Sisters of Saint Joseph during the last month of his approaching death was most consoling. In this relationship, short in time but of a depth that only souls guided by the Spirit can reach, it is shown how true friendship satisfies one of the deepest needs of the human being: to love and be loved. True friendship in religious life attracts people to holiness: this is the purpose of authentic friendship between Christians, and this was the edifying testimony of the relationship between Bormida and the dear sisters.

Fr Eugenio Bianchi is also recognised for his real leaning towards communion with the clergy and religious. In him we see that friendship among religious is a precious opportunity to grow, to share the joy of discernment and vocation together. Ecclesial communion among religious is a measure of human maturity, of Christian and religious fulfilment, a measure of objectivity.

Among the abundant relationships that Fr Eugene established during his life in Beitgemal, the friendship with the Dominican Fr Maurice Gisler, with whom he shared common ideals, is outstanding: love for Jesus and the Holy Scripture, passion aroused by the discovery of St Stephen's tomb and the desire to build a large pilgrimage shrine that would be a source of spreading Christian forgiveness.

Finally, it is sufficient to recall that Fr Rosin's martyrdom was perpetrated thanks to his faithful commitment to the spiritual accompaniment of the religious communities at Rafat.

1.3 Salesian discipleship (a charism passed on from father to son)

Educating and forming has never been an easy task; even less so if what is sought is the configuration of the heart to the sentiments of Christ. Don Bosco succeeded in this

¹⁹⁷ G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama*, 59.

¹⁹⁸ G. SHALHUB, *Abuliatama*, 60.

¹⁹⁹ AIMOR, *Lettera mortuaria di don Varaia Antonio*, October 1913.

arduous task, despite the anticlerical environment that reigned in Turin in the years before the Congregation was founded,²⁰⁰ thanks to the affection he was surrounded with, as well as the admiration and devotion of the young people for their father and friend, whom they persuaded was a man of God. "All this often attracted unlimited trust in him and encouraged the young people to stay with him."²⁰¹

In fact the case of the Salesian Congregation, founded with a small group of young people trained in the spiritual and pastoral school of a single formator, is a unique event in the Church. But this has left a very special mark on spirituality that is expressed not only in the strong attachment to the figure of Don Bosco "father, teacher and friend" but also in a characteristic style of transmission of the charism, marked by a vigorous family style.

One of the finest fruits of the family spirit is vocations. The history of the Congregation amply demonstrates the truth of this in the case of both Don Bosco and the first Salesians. Inserted as they were in the heart of a Salesian community made warm by family affection, many boys learned to model their own lives on those of their educators; they became progressively aware of the germ of a Salesian vocation that God had placed in their heart, and the family atmosphere led them little by little to identify with ideals and the style of life of their teachers; slowly their sense of belonging to the Congregation matured together with the desire to take part in its pastoral activity.

This is the dynamic growth process which is characteristic of the Salesian way of life; the atmosphere is one in which vocations naturally appear and grow; they then mature in the family spirit and a gradual insertion into apostolic work follows almost automatically.²⁰²

Fr Belloni also tried a similar path, and managed to achieve some good results, but circumstances, which were much more constraining, did not allow him to develop as

²⁰⁰ "The undertaking was arduous, but by 1852 it had already been sketched out. Don Bosco began to turn to the young pupils who inspired him: Rua, Francesia, Cagliari, Angelo Savio, Rocchietti, Turchi and others. Evidently his prudence was great. Congregations and friars were not really in fashion at that time. We are told that the boys were inclined to laugh at everything they knew about friars and convents... His tactics were in tune with the mentality of the milieu". WIRTH M, *Da don Bosco ai nostri giorni. Tra storia e nuove sfide*, Rome, LAS, 2000, 124.

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²⁰² *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, 148.

he wished. Instead, it allowed him to be fully in tune with the spiritual and pedagogical method of the Salesians when they arrived in the land of Jesus.

The same can be said of Simon Srugi as of Dominic Savio: he was very good by nature but it was spiritual work and the guidance of courageous teachers in the faith that urged him to take the high road of the Christian life. The gusto with which, as a Salesian, the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph would continually blossom on his lips, could only come from the experience he had lived with innocent intensity in the years of his adolescence under the guidance of Fr Belloni.

Simon's sensitivity as an educator in Beitgemal towards young people, even when his occupations seemed to lead him towards other interests, was certainly formed in the school of Bethlehem and with the example of the father of the orphans.

Srugi also owed his ecumenical spirit to *Abuliatama*:

The charity he showed throughout his life, and without distinction, for Orthodox and Muslims as a nurse and miller, was inspired by what he had seen in Bethlehem. In those days it was not easy, even among Catholics, to find serenity in relations with Muslims and Orthodox: indeed, a strong detachment, not to say adversity, was normal. In the House at Bethlehem, Srugi saw the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Elleno and the Turkish Pasha, Mr Bsciara Effendi Habib, who were kindly received by his benefactor.²⁰³

It is interesting to highlight the figure of Fr Varaia²⁰⁴ and the spirit he brought to Beitgemal, because he was Srugi's first Salesian teacher and therefore had to pass on to him, in their two-year contact, something of his spiritual wealth.

It was Fr Antonio's tact and prudence that created an environment of familiarity, understanding and respect in Beitgemal during the early years of the merger between the Salesians and the Brothers of the Holy Family:²⁰⁵

Fr Varaia, with his modesty and gentleness, has already earned the affection and esteem of everyone; the other Salesians are also very happy ...; peace reigns, contentment, harmony.²⁰⁶

It is in this healthy and proactive environment that Srugi's vocation would be expressed; and a worthy disciple of his first Salesian Rector, he would always show himself to be prudent and delicate in all that could influence community relationships.

²⁰³ *Informatio*, 49.

²⁰⁴ "Adamantine, energetic character; heroic sacrifice; firm piety; unconditional and scrupulous obedience to superiors whom he revered indiscriminately as God's representatives; unquenchable zeal, the most austere mortification." AIMOR, *Lettera mortuaria di don Varaia Antonio*, October 1913.

²⁰⁵ In Bethlehem and Cremona the merger was more conflictual.

²⁰⁶ *Lettera di don Belloni a don G. Barberis*, in ASC 275 *Beitgemal*, Fasc. 4/B, 11.1.1892.

Together with Fr Varaia, Simon developed the ability to sense God's presence in his life and to perceive the continuous guidance of Providence. The environment in Beitgemal had a good religious outlook, and Fr Varaia raised the tone further by making piety, observance, attendance at the sacraments and divine worship flourish there.

With Fr Ruggero Corradini, the second Rector and Novicemaster, Srugi learned regular work, an active apostolate among the boys, a deep life of piety and strict religious observance. "Fr Varaia and Fr Corradini, who had grown up in Don Bosco's own school, had to communicate the Salesian spirit almost by direct contact."²⁰⁷

But he established a true relationship of spiritual sonship with Fr Eugenio Bianchi. As we have seen, Fr Eugenio was a great Salesian educator (causes for beatification have been introduced for five of his novices), and remembered for his typically Salesian fatherliness: demanding yet benevolent. Without doubt, his gospel radicalism and Salesianity were a great incentive for Srugi, who loved and venerated him as a true father. Simon, together with Fr Bianchi, strengthened his desire for generosity and radical approach, learned to be exquisite in his commitment to grow in virtue, and developed devotion to the name of Jesus!

Srugi would remain grateful to Fr Eugenio for the rest of his life. In 1920 Simon gave up a trip to Italy to take care of Fr Bianchi who had fallen from his horse. After 1931 he often repeated when speaking of Heaven: "We will see God, Mary Most Holy, the Angels and Saints up there, we will find our superiors, Don Bosco, we will see Fr Bianchi and our confreres. Oh, what joy! What a feast that will be!"²⁰⁸

In turn, Srugi became a father and spiritual model for many who had the joy of being at his side.

There are abundant references in the mortuary letters to the significance of the figure of great Salesians who, through a total and pure gift of themselves, had passed on, along with particular sensitivities and skills, the desire to be generous and authentic disciples of Christ in the Church with the style proper to the Salesian charism.

It must be acknowledged that in this period some very capable confreres were formed who were the support of the future Province of the Middle East [...] because in the humble spiritual centre of the Orphanage of Beitgemal the values of religious life were lived with intensity.²⁰⁹

The examples given are just a sample, certainly not exhaustive, of what is being said:

²⁰⁷ *Informatio*, 67.

²⁰⁸ *Summ.*, 8-9.

²⁰⁹ *Informatio*, 60.

Giovanni Morosin's passion for Latin was inherited from his revered teacher Fr Mario Rosin, to whom he was bound by the deepest esteem and admiration, by filial confidence and intimate friendship.²¹⁰

Living and working with an authentic Salesian (authentic father, authentic teacher and authentic friend) leads to an understanding of his fundamental values, to wanting to be like him, to stay with him, to communicate what one has perceived from him; it leads to wanting to draw from the same source: from Christ Jesus.

1.4 Disciples of life

Openness to history and dialogue with reality is an essential element in the discipleship of Christ who became incarnate for our salvation.

Just as God's revelation takes the form of the incarnate Logos, so human faith must be "itself fully incarnate: embracing body, soul and spirit"^{211, 212}

The mature Christian is called to have an availability to the action of the Spirit working in their own history and reality; an intelligent and attentive availability, enterprising and ductile, which allows them to live every day of life and every relationship, every age and season, every place and every circumstance, even those that are new or seem adverse, as a time and opportunity for formation, as a time and opportunity to be configured to Christ.

Without such an openness one would never understand Don Bosco's life, spirituality and work:

Open to the action of the Spirit, Don Bosco knew how to interpret the signs of the times and respond in an enlightened, creative and concrete way to the needs as they emerged.²¹³ The relationship with reality became part of the fabric of his vocation. He experienced at first hand the history of the Church and the history of his country. He was able to grasp its complexity and enter into it as a protagonist. The historical context became for him a challenge and a pressing invitation to discernment and

²¹⁰ *Lettera Mortuaria di D. Giovanni Morosin*, in AIMOR, April 1963.

²¹¹ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Gloria I*, 125 mentioned by R. CARELLI, *L'uomo e la donna nella teologia di H. U. Von Balthasar*, Lugano, EUPRESS FTL, 2007, 359.

²¹² R. CARELLI, *L'uomo e la donna nella teologia di H. U. Von Balthasar*, 359.

²¹³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, in *Enchiridion vaticanum*, 15. Official Documents of the Holy See 1996.

action. “I have always gone forward [...] as the Lord inspired me and circumstances demanded”^{214 215}

In fidelity to Christ, who called the confreres of Beitgemal to be Salesians in the Middle East, life has invited them to courageously re-propose the resourcefulness, inventiveness and holiness of Don Bosco as a response to the signs of the times emerging in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century.

This invitation was first and foremost a call to perseverance on the path to holiness through the material and spiritual difficulties that marked daily and extraordinary events. But it was also a call to seek competence in one’s own work and to cultivate a dynamic fidelity to one’s own mission, adapting its forms to new situations and different needs, in complete docility to divine inspiration and to ecclesial, congregational, provincial and finally community discernment.

The greatness of Fr Belloni, Fr Varaia, Fr Corradini, Bro. Bormida, Fr Bianchi, Fr Rosin, Bro. Srugi and the other Beitgemal confreres was precisely this ability (openness to the action of the Spirit in one’s own life) to let themselves be formed by history, to enter into a spiritual dialogue, a paschal and relational dialogue, with reality.

This has not always been the case. In fact, the history of the community of Beitgemal (and more broadly that of the MOR Province) is full of mistakes, fears, challenges not always well met, lack of impetus and creative fidelity.

Today we can find a thousand reasons to judge and condemn them, and a thousand more to understand and absolve them. What we want to highlight now is the objective difficulty of dealing with new, unprecedented and often adverse situations.

How could we ask European Salesians who had learned all their lives that *extra ecclesia* [of course Catholic] *nulla salus* to enter the ecumenical climate that the Eastern mission was beginning to demand? How could we ask them to launch into inculturation when at the time it was more important to remain completely faithful to Don Bosco who had just died? How to establish a healthy and mature dialogue with “the Old Testament confreres”?²¹⁶ when there was suspicion in the Church of the weakness of the identity of the Salesian charism, which drove the Salesians to keep everything as Don Bosco had left it? How can we be prepared to live in a land of continuous wars and political and social injustices and not be upset by the hatred that reigns everywhere? How can we live

²¹⁴ Cf. G.B. LEMOYNE, *Memorie Biografiche del venerabile servo di Dio don Giovanni Bosco* VI, S. Benigno Canavese-Torino, SEI, 1907, 381

²¹⁵ *The Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Principles and Norms. Ratio fundamentalis et studiorum*, S.D.B, Rome, 2000, 37.

²¹⁶ This was the playful nickname the Salesians had for the Brothers of the Holy Family who had become Salesians. Fr Belloni himself and the Arab confreres identified themselves by this nickname.

in peace with the torment of being robbed and mistreated unjustly while spending our lives doing good to all?

The circumstances were really difficult, the spiritual and apostolic challenges often exceeded the imaginable. No specific preparation could have foreseen such challenges. No course could have trained Fr Belloni to leave his post as seminary professor to become the father of the orphans of Palestine, or prepared Bro. Bormida to be betrayed by his own confreres and then dies as a result, or Fr Bianchi to face external and communal warfare, or Fr Rosin for such humiliating exile and then martyrdom.

The history of Beitgemal is full of light and shadows. Difficult situations that brought out the worst in some of the confreres. Very difficult situations: conditioning but not decisive; in fact for other confreres, the same circumstances were experienced as an opportunity to show themselves truly docile to the action of the Spirit.

What we want to emphasise now is that the darkness or weakness that exists in history should not primarily be a cause for scandal but an indication of the reality of the harshness of the trials and pressures endured.

It was impossible to be prepared for such tough challenges, and yet, in Beitgemal, magnificent confreres shone out; not because they were prepared for ecumenism, for dialogue with Muslims, to suffer the consequences of war, betrayal and martyrdom, but they shone out as confreres because they were willing in mind and heart to allow themselves to be configured to Christ, the way, the truth and the life, during their lifetime,²¹⁷ to let themselves be formed by life, because with the eyes of faith they discovered, beyond the often deceptive appearance, that life is mother and teacher, a true educational mediation, in the hands of the Father.

Truly it is God the Father and Teacher but it is throughout life and through it (as it is) where the redemptive action of our configuration with his Son unfolds.

Certainly life is a teacher, but it needs active and current human collaboration, which makes us intelligently shrewd and industrious, spiritually available. This availability cannot be improvised or born out of nothing. Such availability is born of the long and hard work of faith and prayer, of honest and authentic relationship first with God and then with one's neighbour. This availability is the result of a learning process through which the believer perceives in his own history the formative action of God, some times evident and at other times hidden, but nevertheless present in every event and entrusted to human acceptance in freedom and responsibility.

It was the presence or lack of this availability that was the difference in how confreres reacted when faced with the events and challenges they had to tackle at Beitgemal.

²¹⁷ Cf. The concept of *docibilitas* in A. CENCINI, *Lalbero della vita*, 125-134.

Life in its various areas challenged and formed the Beitgemal confreres. Here are some of the most significant: daily life, simple and laborious; life in a multi-ritual context; life in a multi-religious context; life in the context of war and persecution.

1.4.1 Daily life: simple and laborious

While reading the history of Beitgemal one might certainly be impressed by the constant circumstances of war that they underwent with truly heroic Christian patience. Or the discover of the tomb of St Stephen and what that did for the community might take up all our attention. But it would be a great injustice not to realise that the real greatness to be found in the history of Beitgemal was the daily life of the confreres; humble, often hidden²¹⁸ and very demanding life.

In the following of Christ, the confreres in Beitgemal faced a life where joys and sorrows alternated. A life where the most sensational success was the silent sowing of the Presence and Love of God.

To be honest, Beitgemal had felicitous and recognised success for the spiritual and material assistance given to so many orphans who were readied to take up good positions in life because of the education they had received. The chronicles bears precise testimony to this in the whole of their narrative.

Thus the social activity carried out largely on behalf of the poor population surrounding them was largely positive and even if mostly Muslim the people found in Fr Belloni's and the Salesians' work a provident centre of material aid and a valid testimony of Christian charity. The Salesians at Beitgemal were silent, hard-working heroes through their charity among the Christian and Muslim world.

In other respects the Agricultural School was less fortunate. The prime negative fact, the presence of malaria which was deadly especially in certain years and which led to a continuous rotation of staff who were not resistant to the climate.

Even improvements on the land did not meet expectations, due to its largely stony nature, drought, poorly favourable weather conditions, livestock epidemics and the difficulties created by the village staff who worked on the farm. All this can be quickly listed, but only God knows how much effort it entailed for the confreres to offer their educative and pastoral service with constant fidelity, facing the emerging difficulties day after day.

²¹⁸ It is enough to consider Simon Srugi; his presence and activity is only outlined three times [The opening of the clinic (*Cronaca* 1923), Foundation of St Joseph's Sodality (*Cronaca* 1929), Bro, Srugi's death (*Cronaca* 1943)] while in the absence of extraordinary events worthy of being reported in the chronicle, God gave MOR Province the greatest confrere to be found in its history.

In fact, it was not possible to cover the expenses for maintaining the orphans free of charge, and the chronicle, as well as the correspondence preserved in the archives, reveals an insistent request for financial aid to superiors to pay the debts.²¹⁹

The Orphanage might have been located in a most scenic setting, but it was far from urban centres, completely isolated and therefore in difficulties regarding the relationships a school needs to maintain with the civil world. People around took advantage of this through theft and disturbances where the priests lived;²²⁰ there were also the ongoing struggles between Turks, Arabs and Jews that made life dangerous.

In the testimonies of the Beitgemal confreres we sometimes read somewhat idyllic expressions, which speak of tranquillity, silence, the bliss of the countryside. Fr Varaia wrote to the superiors in Turin: “You can call it the mountain of peace here, the house of tranquillity”:²²¹ but these serene isolated voices and moments.

In general we can speak of good results in educational terms, but without hiding the far from happy situations the confreres had to live in. Here is a realistic judgement that the Provincial, Fr Francesco Laconi, expresses in Simon Srugi’s regard, but which at the same time reveals the harsh reality that the community had to face every day:

Beitgemal – a poor house, very out of the way, completely surrounded by Muslim villages, by people often less than kind – was never a house where the confreres longed to go. And our Srugi spent his entire life there, without ever changing, without asking for a break elsewhere.

To have a somewhat adequate idea of the continuous heroism of the Servant of God’s charity, it would be necessary to have an accurate collection and description of the troubled years of the House, of the misery around it, the hunger and thirst, the plagues and diseases they were inflicted by from the day that Simon Srugi set foot in Beitgemal.

It is a pity that the house chronicles were so poor in terms of news and details. Caught up in work and obstacles, especially during the toughest periods (war 1914–1918) at times the confreres spent more effort surviving than writing. And that was natural.

Sometimes sad and painful events like the murder of their Rector, harassment by bandits who came to the house demanding they give them clothing, sums of money on the spot... yet never did the Servant of God get riled or upset, even if having to suffer from real oppression, blackmail, persecution. He endured everything with indescribable fortitude always trying to relieve and comfort the other confreres.

Another less virtuous individual would have asked for a change of house a thousand times. And in fact more than one did.

²¹⁹ Cf. J. BORREGO, *I salesiani nel Medio Oriente*, 108-109.

²²⁰ The Convent, using Franciscan terminology.

²²¹ *Informatio*, 56.

Beitgemal: it was a very poor house and knew many hardships, to the point that the clerics sent there for practical training got away from it. In the opinion of the Province itself, the least intelligent and qualified were sent there.²²²

This was the mountain “of peace and house of tranquillity”. Forgive my sarcasm.

But at the same time this experience was the real field of sanctification for our dear confreres. The fundamental challenge for a believer and for a community is to transform the experience of life, by virtue of faith, into a gospel experience. This is what Fr Eugenio Bianchi did; but no less so also Bro. Bormida and Fr Rosin.

It is easy to proclaim that we are Christians, consecrated individuals, generically Salesians. It is difficult to live as disciples of the Lord, undoing the knots that make life problematic and opening up to the practical needs of the Beatitudes.²²³

In the Salesian experience this is both a joyful and fundamental intuition: there is no need to detach oneself from ordinary life to have a profound experience of encounter with the Lord, of configuration to him.

As insisted in the previous paragraph, the basis of the positive evaluation of daily life is the continuous discovery of the incarnation event.

The human condition of Jesus reveals the fact that God is present in life, and that God affirms life's transcendence. Jesus as Man is the sacrament of the Father, the great and definitive mediation that makes God present and close to us. He teaches us that the place to meet God is in human reality: our own and that of others, daily and throughout history. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). It is human life that inserts us in the event of the Incarnation.

Life therefore is primarily a “gift” offered to all – a “mysterious” gift because of the expectations to which it gives rise. It is like a jewel-case containing unforeseen meanings and horizons.²²⁴

²²² *Summ.*, 61.

²²³ Perhaps the idea is a bit forced but I don't believe it is far from reality if, in the lives of the confreres at Beitgemal, we see a concretisation of the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are you, Fr Belloni, poor in spirit, because the kingdom of heaven is for those like you.

Blessed are you, confreres of Beitgemal, afflicted, because those like you will be consoled.

Blessed are you, Fr Bianchi, meek, because those like you will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, because they will have their fill.

Blessed are you, Bro. Bormida, merciful, because those like you will find mercy.

Blessed are you, Bro. Srugi, pure of heart, because those like you will see God.

Blessed are you, Fr Varaia, worker for peace, because those like you will be called children of God.

Blessed are you, Fr Rosin, persecuted for the cause of justice, because the kingdom of heaven is for those like you.

Blessed are you when they insult you, persecute you, and lying, will speak all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and exult, because great is your reward in heaven.

²²⁴ 23RD GENERAL CHAPTER-SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO, *Educating the young in the faith, Chapter Documents*, Rome, S.D.B., 1990, no 163.

Here is the daily spirituality lived by the confreres in Beitgemal, especially by Simon Srugi; true spirituality, because thanks to the action of the Spirit and his acceptance of it, Srugi consistently assumed the ordinary side of life; he accepted the challenges, the questions, the tensions of growth and other factors in the ups and downs his concrete mission required, there as they appeared, wherever, whenever and how God had called him to spend his life on behalf of the most needy.

All this required a considerable spiritual tension, because the same challenges can lead to a profound spirituality of everyday life or to a monotonous and empty routine, closer to death than to life.

Spending one's whole life in the same environment, with the same occupations and in a location far from the big centres, is often, for mediocre spirits, a cause of inner impoverishment and a narrow mindset.

In fact, living in a state of isolation, if the supernatural trust given by the Communion of Saints, which has become a daily reality, is missing, can also harm religious souls who risk growing up in an environment made artificial not by the structure or the requirements of a Rule, but by the selfishness of those who, although called to give of themselves more, close themselves off in the narrow panorama of their own small world.

This could also have happen to the Servant of God had he not lived his inner life with all the intensity of someone who loves, and had he not looked at the living circumstances that surrounded him with the eye of faith.

The "rust of awful everyday" that so easily levels even the best spirits, did not crystallise him in a rigid schedule or in a stereotypical succession of occupations: he did everything for love and love gives a soul to life.²²⁵

Srugi's spiritual commitment consisted in putting back together the fragments of life in the unity achieved by the Spirit; working to overcome the ambiguities present in daily experience; but above all 'fermenting' every choice with love: all this was the obligatory step to discover and love everyday life as a new reality in which God worked as a Father.

1.4.2 Life in a multi-ritual context²²⁶

When the Salesians arrived in Palestine, in the orphanages at Bethlehem, Beitgemal, Cremisan, they found only Christian pupils, perhaps more for practical reasons than a particular mindset. The one exception was Beitgemal, about which Fr Belloni wrote in 1887 that "of the 60 boarders almost all are Catholics, less one who is still a

²²⁵ E. FORTI, *Un buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, 63-64.

²²⁶ For a better understanding of this term we refer to J. POLACEK, *I salesiani di don Bosco e le figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nella Palestina, specialmente tra il 1891 e il 1910*, Rome, Archivio PIO, 1976.

Mohammedan”²²⁷ But even Fr Belloni, before the Salesians arrived, took in a number of non-Catholic Oriental rite boys. So in 1887 Beitgemal had “4 Greek schismatics converted and 6 who had run away from the Protestant orphanage.”²²⁸

At Beitgemal the Salesians naturally dedicated themselves to the Christians; of these, Latin rite were only one part, almost always a minority. The initial restrictions imposed by the ecclesiastical authorities on privileging Latins, changed in 1920 in an urgent request by the same authority, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, that Beitgemal see to “the instruction and Christian education first and foremost of young Catholics [emphasis on the term “Catholics” instead of “Latins”] who belonged to the Patriarchate, especially the poor ones, and then schismatics [...], at least for now Greeks and Armenians, because otherwise they would go to Protestant schools.”²²⁹

After the merger with the Salesians, Fr Belloni’s work increased the number of Eastern dissidents who entered, rather more than the number of Eastern Uniate members.²³⁰ At Beitgemal in 1897, with no day students, “there were various schismatics [...] and even one Armenian who had seen his parents murdered in the 1896 massacres.”²³¹

The case regarding this boy, who later became Fr Almagian, will be discussed in the final paragraph of this chapter; here it is only noted that the Armenian massacres had some repercussions for the Salesians in the Middle East.²³²

²²⁷ A. BELLONI, *Bulletin Annuel*, Bethlehem, 1887, 17.

²²⁸ A. BELLONI, *Bulletin Annuel*, Bethlehem, 1887, 14.

²²⁹ *Lett. di D. Rosin a D. Sutura*, in ASC 31.42 *MO Relaz. Aut. Eccl.*, 22.7.1919. This is the report by Fr Sutura, requested by the Patriarch of Jerusalem at the request of Propaganda, 16.6.1919.

²³⁰ Orphans continually arrive: “Today the Latin parish priest of Ramallah sent me an orphaned and abandoned boy. [...] He is of Greek origin, but his mother became a Catholic for some time. I gladly took him in here, but the dormitories are already more than full [...]. In order not to send him back into the midst of the Turks, I recommend him to you [in Beitgemal] convinced that Providence will take care of maintaining him.” *Belloni A. a Varaia A.*, in ASC 275, 17.9.1894.

²³¹ *Lettera di D. Vercauteren C. a D. Durando*, in ASC 38 *Beitgemal*, 31.3.1897.

²³² “This sad event marks a departure point in the history of the Salesian missionary apostolate, so deserves a brief digression. The world was moved by the misfortune of Armenian Catholics, and there were demonstrations on their behalf in the large cities. The Salesians responded in their typical style. In December 1896 the *Bollettino Salesiano* printed a letter dated 24 July and already published in various dailies, written by Fr Belloni to one of his friends, Fr Giuseppe M. De Carlo, in which he told the story of a visit from an Armenian Catholic priest, parish priest of Beirut. He described the sad situation of so many towns in Armenia and the great number of orphaned children, vagabonds, homeless and without food; many were picked up by the Turks and sold [...] and he had ardently begged him to accept a certain number of these unfortunate orphans. Fr Belloni had told him that his orphanage was already full, but faced with such an urgent case he promised to organise a new dormitory, counting on the help of benefactors in whose hands he was ‘pronouncing a sentence of life or death of innocent children who had escaped the massacres by the Turks.’ The dormitory was ready within a year. The *Bollettino Salesiano* returned to the subject in March 1897, showing as an example the senior students at Alassio who had sent a spontaneous donation ‘for the Armenian orphans at the orphanage in

It was not always easy to observe the prescriptions of art. 3 of *Orientalium dignitas* which required them to see that they could attend their own rite and to see that the boarders also had (if there were at least ten of that rite) a priest from the rite who “would celebrate Mass at least on Sundays, administer the sacraments and impart catechetical and liturgical instruction.” This gave rise to many practical difficulties.

Towards 1900 one annual Report stated that “mixing Greek schismatics with Latins is a plague”; because they “did not receive the sacraments while regularly attending religious services, they had an influence on the Latins who also did not receive the sacraments out of human respect”; thus the presence of Greek orthodox would be an obstacle to creating a true environment of solid Christian piety.²³³

Even here, life has taught us to gradually overcome difficulties, and difficult situations have served many times as a stimulus to amalgamate pupils from different Churches and rites with each other and with the Salesians both in intentions and in practical life.

The Salesians have evolved, some with great effort, together with the Church in their ecumenical mentality, even if, to tell the truth, what we call ecumenism of charity today was already the experience ... from the very foundation of the orphanage.

Certainly contact with ritual diversity led many Salesians in Beitgemal to develop the typically Salesian attitudes of openness and cordiality. In fact, many showed that they had received the gift of empathy from the Holy Spirit and committed themselves to modelling their relational skills on the gentleness of Christ's heart.

1.4.3 Life in a multi-religious context

In Beitgemal, integration with the Arab and Jewish world was quite problematic, as was to be expected. Relations, first with Muslims and then with Jews, were found to have been numerous and courteous, but for many Salesians they remained mostly superficial and rarely reached a point of intimacy with the people. The Chronicle, usually written by missionary rectors, highlights the difficulty in discovering, beyond appearances, the ethical and spiritual values of the people around them who had a social mentality and a cultural heritage very different from that of the Salesians.

In this sense, the history of the community quite frequently reflects the mentality of the Western world and of the pre-conciliar Church with regard to Islam and Judaism.

Bethlehem; Fr Rua blessed the initiative, and urged that publicity be given to the boys taken in at Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cremisan, Beitgemal. They were probably no more than a dozen in number, but it opened the way to the extent that in 1919 Beitgemal saw ‘the number of pupils increase with Armenian orphans.’ J- BORREGO, *I salesiani nel Medio Oriente*, 206.

²³³ *Relazione annuale*, in ASC 31.23 MO, 1900 and 1931.

It draws attention, however, to how the radical approach of the Gospel and openness of mind, the fruit of a humanity matured in faith, gave rise to a “second nature” in the community or a mindset existing alongside the “more Western” one. Contact with people of different nationalities²³⁴ and religions led some Salesians, attentive to the appeals of the Spirit, to develop prophetic attitudes of dialogue, charity, service and respectful proclamation. The Church would promote this approach to non-Christians especially as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

We are focusing on the experience of Simon Srugi because it is the most radical and, precisely because of his holiness, the most spiritually authoritative. However, remember that one of the main objectives of this investigation is to look at the figure of Srugi in relation to his community. He was not an oasis in the desert; he grew and matured in faith and charity thanks to his community; through it and with it he learned to relate as a disciple of the Lord with non-Christian brothers and sisters, and with him and thanks to him other Salesians, especially the brothers, immersed themselves in the apostolate of relationships and charity.

It is universally known how difficult the task of Christianity penetrating the Muslim world is. The Islamic faith is tenaciously closed in on itself and defends itself to the point of fanaticism: abandoning it entails an extreme risk, because its defence involves not only the individual, but also the family and society.

If Srugi or the other confreres at Beitgemal had aroused even the least suspicion that they wanted to proselytise, not only would they have been looked upon with distrust, but they would have become victims of revenge and reprisals: this would have resulted in the failure of practically all the Salesian activity that was planned through prudent dialogue in the Beitgemal area.

Someone who openly worked for the conversion of a Muslim would have exposed himself to the danger of not doing anything more, compromising the whole institution. The Servant of God had to speak with Muslims cautiously so as not to upset them by being fanatical about conversion.²³⁵

The only possible apostolate among Muslims, as a matter of course, was an indirect one consisting of presence among them, consistent witness to Christian life, mutual esteem and sympathy, and the unselfish exercise of charity.

This attitude, carried out with extreme patience and prudence for years, could soften the barriers that divided Christians and Muslims for centuries and, in very rare cases,

²³⁴ We think *in primis* of the Palestinians, but then the Jews, and at a time of war, also of Turks, British, Egyptians, Poles.

²³⁵ *Summ.*, 292.

with the help of God's grace, could also result in conversion.²³⁶ This is what the entire history of relations between Christians and Muslims teaches us.

If Islamic impenetrability placed so many limits and so many difficulties on the direct evangelizing action of the Salesians in Beitgemal, then the action of the confreres, especially that of Srugi, unfolded in a conscious way, with a precise supernatural purpose, in the indirect apostolate. It was an heroic apostolate, in which self-sacrificing and prudent charity converged admirably to somehow bring the message and the Christian spirit to the Muslims who approached them. The results of their activity were very positive, but unfortunately these results were lost, together with the Muslim population after the expulsion of the Palestinians by the Jews in the 1948 war.

Let us recall first of all the effectiveness of Srugi's presence among the Muslims, which was like that of very few others. For about 50 years, the Servant of God lived in Beitgemal in a continuous and intimate relationship with the ones who lived in the surrounding villages. He did not meet them only occasionally and in external circumstances, but lived with them, one can truly say, every day, in the work of the mill or in the services of the clinic. He met children, adults and families. He dealt with the Muslims in the Orphanage, but also frequently visited them in their poor homes. He spent years of quiet industriousness with them, but was often called upon to act as peacemaker in cases of local disputes and found himself amid dramatic moments of hatred and fighting between unrestrained factions. All his activity was devoted mainly to them with love, sacrifice, in a close correspondence of feeling and collaboration.

In the history of hagiography there is no lack of people who chose to live among Muslims and by their presence wished to give a testimony of Christian life. Srugi did something more: he not only sought to give testimony of his presence among them, but he established a relationship of true involvement in their life, their sorrow and their needs. He felt that he was not only among them and close to them, but like one of them in sharing their affairs and their miseries above all: and as such he was well loved by the Muslims too. He overcame every prejudice and every detachment from them, overcoming secular attitudes, and established a meeting of authentic communion with them, even beyond just one of mutual esteem and trust.²³⁷

Simon Srugi not only lived among Muslims and for Muslims, but by his holiness he learned to appreciate their people and respect their religion. He made them appreciate the

²³⁶ "Significant among them all is the case of Joseph Hafiri, a Muslim, hospitalised in the orphanage and healed "with the kind and patient care of Bro. Srugi". Hafiri himself testified as a deposition: 'At that time I was still a Muslim and from time to time Bro. Srugi asked me if I did not feel the desire to become a Christian. Perhaps as a result of his prayers the Lord gave birth to this desire in me and I was catechised. Not being able to be baptised on the spot, the superiors advised me to go to Italy where I remained from 1929 to 1934. In 1930 I was able to be baptised in Cumiana. It is no secret that, in order to be baptised, he had to leave the country and thus escape the reprisals of his people.' *Informatio*, 209.

²³⁷ *Informatio*, 211-212.

great values of Christianity and this was his great achievement and merit. By his delicate and convinced gestures, he made Muslims understand the truth of the Gospel message, taught them to respect Jesus and Our Lady, educated them to forgiveness, gave them the irresistible lesson of charity.

Faith was inspired by deeds rather than by invitations and exhortations. Simon managed to give rise to a desire in the midst of the Muslim population to grow in Christian values, but achieved this because he himself constantly listened to the Spirit and humbly followed Christ as he related with them day after day.

1.4.4 Life in the context of war and persecution

In addition to the general risk that being Christians, religious, missionaries on earth with a Muslim majority could always entail, in the period between 1881 and 1958 Beitgemal was involved in four periods of armed conflict: 1914–1919 the First World War; from 1930 the increasing violence of Arab guerrillas turned against the new Jewish community and the British police: this tension reached its peak between 1936–1939; then in 1940 the Second World War began; and finally came the 1948–1950 with the expulsion of the Palestinians and the creation of the State of Israel.

It is understood that in these periods there is almost no news of a religious nature in the Chronicle, because the external events with the consequences they had for the life of the community became the focus for all the chroniclers. The details of these sad times have been abundantly told especially in the second chapter; now we stress how the Salesians experienced this in terms of their formation, that is, as an opportunity for configuration to Christ.

On the one hand, the First World War uprooted the entire grand project of agricultural promotion that Fr Bianchi and Fr Sachetti were carrying out in the name of the superiors in Turin. It was cut off from the roots. On the other hand it was the opportunity for Fr Eugenio to display his fatherly kindness, maintaining the Salesian spirit with true heroism in situations like this.

With Fr Bianchi, Beitgemal had gained a father. The times were so difficult that his loving, understanding and strong heart was needed to comfort and animate the confreres and young people in their hour of trial.²³⁸

Fr Bianchi's charity, serenity and unlimited trust in God did not end with the young people and the confreres: even with the soldiers on both sides, he showed signs of God's fatherhood:

²³⁸ E. FORTI, *Un buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, 53.

On November 10, the Turkish-German army suffered serious defeat and on days 12, 13, 14 and 15 the soldiers who previously came to taunt the community, now hungry and wounded, begged for help, although there was no lack of others who came with threats. Everyone was offered bread, olives and vegetables to eat to their fill, and after a word from Fr Bianchi they left more serene.²³⁹

And his kindness gained the recognition of having conquered hatred with love:

The officers, but especially the Commander, greeted the Salesian community affectionately. One of the officers confessed that a few hours earlier the Governor of Jerusalem had telephoned and ordered the arrest of the Italian Salesians in Beitgemal, but that the Commander did not want to do so, saying: "These are people who work for humanity. Let's leave them in peace."²⁴⁰

The first war also resulted in the death of Bro. Bormida. And here too, life becomes a teacher. He affirms the Letter to the Hebrews: "[Christ] learned obedience through what he suffered."²⁴¹ We can say the same of Bro. Bormida who learned what mercy and forgiveness were by offering them at the hour of death to both his corporal persecutors (Turkish soldiers) and spiritual ones (his confreres).

The tortures of exile in Turkey also led Bro. Giacomo Zanchetta to heaven;²⁴² But as far as we are concerned, our attention focuses on Fr Mario Rosin, the only survivor who decided to return to his mission post and faithfully continue his work on behalf of the orphans from Palestine. One wonders if this was not Fr Rosin's true offering of martyrdom, and that what happened in 1938 was only the consequence (accidental or otherwise) of that oblation of life, consumed in love and faith, decided upon with full awareness and conviction even after the harsh exile suffered in the First World War.

Perhaps for some confreres the First World War took them by surprise (it is not possible to know how many and which ones), but certainly after it the consciousness of the possibility of other conflicts, more than hypothetical, remained with the confreres;

²³⁹ Cf. p. 35.

²⁴⁰ Cf. p. 36.

²⁴¹ *Heb* 5:8

²⁴² Brother Giacomo Zanchetta worked at Beitgemal for 15 years and was then transferred to Cremisan. In the final stage of the war, when British troops were already approaching Judea, the confreres from Bethlehem and Cremisan lacked bread. In that difficult situation, Fr Mario Rosin, Rector in Bethlehem, and Bro. Zanchetta, economist at Cremisan wanted to try to go to Beitgemal to supply flour to the two communities. They were both arrested on the way to Hebron on November 17, 1917 and dragged to prison for wandering around the war zone. After serving time in prison, they were sent into exile in central Anatolia. During the trip the good Zanchetta fell violently ill with typhus. Forcefully removed from Fr Rosin's side, he was left dying and speechless in a hospital in Eski Sceir, where he died on March 14, 1918. Cf. *Lettera mortuaria del sig. Giacomo Zanchetta* for six other confreres from the communities in Bethlehem and Cremisan this exile made them suffer two years of hell on earth.²⁴³, in AIMOR, March 1918.

and many, aware of the significance of this, remained there: “In matters that benefit youth at risk or serve to gain souls for God, I move ahead even to the point of recklessness.”²⁴⁴

And amid this tension the service of witness and charity continued:

They presented themselves confidently to the outpatient clinic where Srugi welcomed them with charity and prudence in order not to harm the House in any way, threatened both by reprisals from revolutionaries and by the strict control of the police.

In order not to compromise anyone, the wise nurse treated the wounded in private homes, keeping absolute silence with everyone, and faithfully following the prudential rules spelt out to him by the Rector.²⁴⁵

Here, then, is the tension in a community of Christ’s followers in a context of war: an encouragement to charity, faith and truth but at the same time prudence, a high capacity for dialogue, respect and forgiveness.

In this the Salesians in Beitgemal were spiritually assisted to some degree by the memory and veneration of Saint Stephen, deacon (servant) and first martyr (witness). The Chronicles, the mortuary letters and the various biographies amply attest to this dimension of emulation and configuration to Christ crucified, encouraged by the testimony of St Stephen, also because of the presence of the tomb of the holy martyr.

In fact, similar circumstances of continuous armed conflicts broadened their awareness to a dimension that, in itself, is intrinsic to the faith and, therefore, proper to all Christians: openness to the possibility of martyrdom.

Martyrdom is proper to being a Christian, because Jesus told us so, when he declares the conditions that one must accept in order to become his disciple: to deny oneself and take up one’s cross to the point of giving one’s life. Therefore, in this obedience – to truth and to God – there is also the possibility of martyrdom, that is, of giving one’s life for fidelity to the truth and for fidelity to Christ, who is the revelation of God. Martyrdom is intrinsic to faith, not in the sense that I must seek martyrdom, but in the sense that I must keep in mind that martyrdom can exist for me. And the Christians who today give their lives for Christ, who suffer for Christ, on the one hand call on the commitment of faith and, at the same time, become themselves, like Stephen, an proclamation of salvation and introduce others to the faith, as Stephen did for Paul.²⁴⁶

According to the testimony of a Muslim teenager, the only spectator of the killing, Fr Rosin’s first reaction was a plea for mercy: “But no! I’m a poor priest who hasn’t hurt

²⁴⁴ E. CERIA, *Memorie Biografiche del beato Giovanni Bosco XIV*, S. Benigno Canavese-Torino, SEI, 1933, 662.

²⁴⁵ E. FORTI, *Un buon samaritano concittadino di Gesù*, 139.

²⁴⁶ M. CE, *Il martirio oggi*, message to the diocese of Venice, 26 December 2008.

anyone!”²⁴⁷ But then he kept quiet, and here many would like to see the acceptance, in faith, of martyrdom. It is a legitimate interpretation, even if it appears to rely on a not very authoritative statement with the weakness that it is based on the hypothesis of an interpretation of silence. This is a problem if we want to assert acceptance in the important case of martyrdom.

In our opinion, he had made the option for martyrdom four hours earlier when he decided to fulfil his priestly duty, despite the high risks of the situation. The option for martyrdom was already taken, a week earlier, when he shared with his confreres the real possibility of this happening. The option for martyrdom was taken, even a month earlier, when outraged and threatened to death he decided to stay there (against the advice of many) to fulfil his service. The option for martyrdom was taken twenty years earlier, when after the very ugly experience of exile he decided to return to Palestine to be a sign of God’s love for young people. Option for martyrdom confirmed day after day in love, service and self-denial, quite apart from the hypothetical interpretation of silence.

Certainly this openness to the possibility of martyrdom gives a great spiritual thrust to the configuration of oneself to Christ. And configuration to the crucified Christ helps one to be radically open to the possibility of martyrdom.

In a supreme act of self-offering, Fr Rosin had made a bloodied cross of himself. The other Salesians also strove to assimilate their lives to Christ. Certainly, Simon Srugi stands out.²⁴⁸ He had understood, no less than his beloved Rector, the mystery of the cross in his life: he did not let a day go by without willingly carrying it on his shoulders, following in the footsteps of the divine Master.

“The Crucified Lord must be your preferred book”, Srugi noted down in his written thoughts, and added that “the Religious, being consecrated to Jesus, must be nailed with him.”²⁴⁹ “I want to carry his cross every day in order to be a true disciple of Jesus.”²⁵⁰

2. Simon Srugi: The little way of humility

“The works of the religious, however small and simple they may be, are precious and pleasing to God when they are done with pleasure in giving glory to the Lord”, wrote Srugi in the 1932 retreat.

²⁴⁷ AIMOR, *Lettere mortuaria don Mario Rosin*, July 1938.

²⁴⁸ S. SRUGI, *Massime sul Sacro Cuore*, in AIMOR. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 97].

²⁴⁹ S. SRUGI, *Massime sul Sacro Cuore*, in AIMOR. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 89].

²⁵⁰ Cf. S. SRUGI, *Propositi ritiro spirituale 25 agosto 1927*, in AIMOR, 1927. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 428].

In tune with what we have already indicated there are also some thoughts that the good brother had diligently noted down under the generic title: “St Francis de Sales says”:²⁵¹

The Lord wants you to think about always grasping and using opportunities to serve him and practise the virtues minute by minute.

Put small things into practice without which big things are often false and deceptive. Let us gladly learn to suffer humiliating words aimed at suppressing our opinions and proposals.

Direct your thoughts to improving yourself in all your ordinary actions, and carry the large and small crosses that come to you. Believe me that the secret of becoming saints lies here.

Let us try to be what God wants since we are his, and let us try not to be what we want to be against his intentions.²⁵²

Enlightened by the Spirit of the Lord, Simon had guessed what was the shortest path to holiness and he too had set out on that “Little Way” that St Theresa of the Child Jesus had taken before him. For both of them there was a need to be simple and humble of heart.

Authoritative witnesses say that Simon spent his day in silence and obscurity, always seeking to remain in the shadows. His only concern was to observe the Holy Rule with extreme perfection.

A life full of small acts carried out with the constant commitment to do them well and with love: this is how the great heroism of the little way flourished in Simon: the royal path by which the soul in love with Him proceeds towards God.

As a citizen of Nazareth, Bro. Srugi imitated the Saviour in his hidden and humble life. His resolutions continually reminded him of thoughts of humility, which he derived from readings, but which he assimilated deeply. He had a very low opinion of himself and often repeated, with conviction, the words of the Gospel: “Nothing good can come from Nazareth, and I am that nothing.”

He was meek by nature and character, but he had a clear supernatural sense of humility and this inspired his inner attitude. “I will make the commitment to perfect my soul by eradicating every reason for pride, vanity ... to make it worthy of possessing God.”

²⁵¹ These thoughts are taken from: E. CERIA, *La Vita Religiosa secondo gl'insegnamenti di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, SEI, 1938.

²⁵² S. SRUGI, *Massime varie*, in AIMOR. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thoughts 199-202].

He considered himself the least of the community, never put himself in limelight, never talked about himself and his family, about what he had done or about his skills. He suffered when someone praised him in front of his confreres and addressed any recognition given him to God or to others. In meetings of the confreres he usually kept silent, and in conversations he agreed with the others rather than making his own judgement prevail, unless charity or propriety suggested otherwise. His warmth and availability to everyone and always, were an expression of his humility.²⁵³

Srugi's humility predisposed him to having delicate and respectful attitude, not only towards superiors and confreres, but also towards boys and the rough types who came to the clinic and the mill.

When he was occasionally the object of humiliating and disgusting behaviour he did not react, but accepted everything out of a supernatural motivation of humility, happy to suffer like Jesus.

Everything in his life was a manifestation of his humility: his clothing, his work, his room, his attitude in community life, his way of dealing with people. Everything was for God and for others; nothing for himself.

In particular, this attitude of true humility was shown in the continuous, and sometimes heroic acts of forgiveness and mercy, as will be seen later.

3. The tomb of St Stephen and the Work of Christian Forgiveness

As we saw broadly in the second chapter, during the First World War (and precisely in 1916), an archaeological discovery was made at Beitgemal which created religious interest around the Salesian house and gave direction to the spirituality of the Salesians who spent some time of their life there, urging them to a more heroic practice of charity and mercy.

We will briefly outline the story of the discovery²⁵⁴ and its consequences, and then go on to recognise and appreciate its most significant spiritual fruits.

In 1916 Brother Angelo Bormida, while digging at the bottom of the courtyard, chanced upon the remains of an ancient mosaic. Shortly afterwards they found the

²⁵³ *Positiones seu articuli*, 43.

²⁵⁴ For a greater understanding we refer to specialised works on the subject: G. FERGNANI, *Il Sepolcro di S. Stefano Protomartire scoperto a Beitgemal*, monograph, Turin, 1930; G. FERGNANI, *L'Invenzione di S. Stefano Protomartire negli scritti di S. Agostino*, Beitgemal, 1930; G. FERGNANI, *Cafargamala*, Jeruslaem, 1923; A. SACCHETTI, *Studi Stefanini*, Beitgemal, 1934; A. CHARBEL, *Beit-jimal identificata con Caphar-Gamala negli studi di St. H. Stephan*, in *Salesianum* 31 (1969) 667-676; A. ROCCA, *Vita di Santo Stefano protomartire*, San Benigno Canavese, Tipografia Don Bosco, 1923.

remains of an ancient *Martyrium* which thanks to the demanding archaeological study by Dominican M. Gisler was identified with the tomb of Saint Stephen.

The discovery was of great historical importance, but it led the confreres of the house, and in particular its outstanding Rector, Fr Eugenio Bianchi, to also enhance the spiritual message of the Tomb. St Stephen is the classic saint of Christian forgiveness: the sense of forgiveness was greatly needed all over the world after the hatred of war, and in particular among the various Palestinian ethnic groups ready to unleash on each other and eliminate the other.

It was therefore decided to promote the message of St Stephen among people, setting up an Association that called itself the *Pious Work of St Stephen the Protomartyr for Spreading Christian Forgiveness*. The Association was approved by Pope Pius XI on 9 June 1923.²⁵⁵

Other than this initiative of a spiritual nature, the Salesian community promoted the construction of a Church dedicated to St Stephen by building the *Martyrium* above his tomb. And so in 1930 there was the solemn consecration of the Church, a real jewel in clear Byzantine style matching the mosaics found in the excavations.

The confreres in Beitgemal experienced the archaeological discoveries and the various stages of the construction of the Church with enthusiasm and with a religious soul. They zealously subscribed to the Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness. They celebrated the feasts of St Stephen with solemn devotion and worked to make forgiveness the imperative of their behaviour, as well as making forgiveness the subject of frequent exhortations addressed to young people, visitors and Muslims.

We know, because of the lack of harmony that continued, especially between local confreres and missionaries, that not all were consistent and faithful to the appeal to mercy addressed by God through the testimony of St Stephen.

Nonetheless, we find abundant and beautiful evidence of a sincere effort to learn “to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”. We mention only four:

The first is undoubtedly the story of Bro. Angelo Bormida who went to heaven forgiving his killers despite being betrayed and handed over to death by his own confreres.

The second is offered through the life of Fr John Almagian,²⁵⁶ who while still a child witnessed the murder of his parents, victims of one of the frequent Armenian massacres.

²⁵⁵ Cf. The Statutes of the Pious Work, p. 38.

²⁵⁶ John Almagian: son of Minas and Calagian, born in Marasce (Armenia) on 28 September 1886 and died in Istanbul (Turkey) on 1 June 1945, at 59 years of age, 40 of profession and 32 f priesthood. He did his high school studies in Bethlehem and Beitgemal and on 29 August 1904 he entered the novitiate in Cremisan. He took the clerical habit in the same year and made his triennial profession on November 15, 1905. He

Taken in by devout individuals, he was sent to the Salesian orphanage at Bethlehem in 1896 and from there to Beitgemal.

The tragic death of his parents remained impressed in his heart like a prickly thorn that made him groan and sometimes involuntarily tore from his lips burning words against those who had been the immediate cause of so much barbarity. But then he forgave and apologised, asking God for mercy for the merciless persecutors of his beloved and unhappy country and the cruel killers of those who gave him life.²⁵⁷

The third testimony is from local confreres who worked on behalf of poor Muslim farmers. It is well known that among Christians in the Middle East there often remains a deep aversion to Muslims. Especially the families, clans and tribes that were particularly persecuted or tortured in the past, inherit an acute distrust towards the followers of Mohammed.²⁵⁸ It is much the same for Muslims in their relationships with Christians.

The local Salesians (John Almagian, Peter Sarchis, Peter Katan, Simon Srugi, Joseph Hauila, George Haruni, Naim Combaz, John Nahas, Joseph Calis, Atalla Auad, Roumman Spiridione, Khalil Sciueri), who followed Christ including in what he said about loving their enemies, had, in the spirit of Christian forgiveness, to go beyond themselves in order to show kindness and charity towards Muslims; some of them proved exceptional in this.

Finally, as the last testimony, we record the attitude of Simon Srugi in the painful circumstances of the death of Fr Mario Rosin. It is easy to imagine the feelings that reigned in the house due to what had happened and what could happen again. Instead, Sister Teresilla Ferrero offers her testimony of heroic charity for one's neighbour without limits:

On one occasion after the murder of Fr Mario Rosin, the Rector of Beitgemal, and precisely the next day, three not very reassuring individuals came to the clinic on one or other pretext, three real thugs from Deraban who were suspected to be

also made his perpetual profession in Bethlehem on 4 October 1908. He worked for a long time in the Houses in Palestine, especially in Bethlehem, performing various tasks, always with a praiseworthy spirit of industriousness and sacrifice. Because of his knowledge of Turkish, he was sent to the House in Istanbul towards the end of 1912 and was ordained a priest there in November the following year. After the First World War he went to Italy, where he remained for some time, and then returned to Palestine, to Bethlehem, in 1924 and remained there until 1929 as councillor for the orphans. From 1929 to his death he stayed in Istanbul, in various roles, and was a valuable support for the House as a faithful interpreter for the Rector, and valuable assistant in all matters dealing with the local government.

²⁵⁷ *Lettera mortuaria di Giovanni Almagian*, in AIMOR, June 1945.

²⁵⁸ One thinks, for example, that the Srugi (originally Fer'on) family history goes back to around 1550, when they were forced to migrate from Hauran, and flee the Damascus region, leave Furzol (in the Bequaa), take refuge in Tersihaha and finally, after changing name to lose all trace of who they were, finding refuge in 1772 in Nazareth, where they were finally able to establish themselves and make a home.

responsible for the crime. In fact, even when they came, no real problem occurred, but they certainly came to see how things would turn out and what feelings there were in Beitgemal. They came to the clinic and I was alone at that moment. To be honest – and I humbly confess this – I did not completely agree with Bro. Srugi's feelings, so I glared at them and shut the door in their faces with four choice words. But immediately after, Bro. Srugi arrived, and seeing what had happened, or rather having learned from the three who immediately told him on his arrival how I had treated them, he called me back to duty with the thought of the passion and death of the Lord and told me : “Not this way mother, not this way.” Jesus Christ Our Lord on the cross said on behalf of his crucifiers: *Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do!* And it could be that with our forgiveness they will repent and do better in the future.²⁵⁹

Some days later six or seven thugs broke down the door to the clinic, also pushing Bro. Srugi violently to the floor and asked to be treated immediately. Simon once again said: “the Lord said: ‘Forgive them for they do not know what they do.’” These characters didn't leave, and Bro. Srugi treated them calmly and naturally as if nothing had happened.

Something more serious happened. A few days later, chased by the British police and wounded in the head, the one who, in the opinion of the community, was primarily responsible for the killing of Fr Rosin arrived at the clinic. The sister proposed handing him over to the British who were about to arrive: Srugi instead treated him and let him escape.

And to the sister who was protesting “vigorously” once again he replied: “Hand him over to justice? Why? Should we do wrong? We must always do good to others. If he has done wrong he has to deal with God who will see to justice. But we always have to do good to our neighbour and forgive. Then he added (and I recall this well) ... “as if nothing has happened... So with our religious behaviour we set a good example, and so they will understand that we Christians are something more than they are by practising Christian forgiveness.”²⁶⁰

The lesson of charity and forgiveness had its effect. In fact, three months after the death of Fr Rosin, five leaders of armed rebel bands on horseback came to Beitgemal and asked to speak with the Salesian superiors. Their visit was to apologise for the Rector's death and ensure the punishment of those who were guilty. The Salesian superiors told them that they willingly forgave. “Our faith” they said “exhorts us and indeed obliges us to forgive.”

And again the testimony of Sister Ferrero who refers to Simon Srugi's comment on all this:

²⁵⁹ *Summ.*, 32.

²⁶⁰ *Informatio*, 133.

Sister, those poor people will remember this day for their whole life. They too have a conscience and a soul to save. The Lord made them feel remorse so much that they came to humble themselves, and the superiors did well to forgive and forget. The Lord will do justice, but it is up to us to forgive and always do good. Let us pray for them and who knows that they may e converted.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ *Summ.*, 28-29.

Chapter Five

Elements for a Salesian Spirituality in the the Middle East

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,
ask for whatever you wish,
and it will be done for you.
My Father is glorified by this,
that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.
As the Father has loved me,
so I have loved you...
No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends.
(Jn 15:7-8,12-13)*

The time has come to identify, from this interpretation of the history of the Beitgemal community in the light of faith, the applications for the life and spiritual formation of the Salesians in the Middle East, in view of a more existential dimension in the research as a whole.

We asked ourselves in the introduction: what did God inspire in the Beitgemal community that can help the confreres of the Province today to grow in their identity as Salesians in the Middle East? After the historical, theological and spiritual journey we have taken, it seems to us well founded to stress the following conclusions.

Undoubtedly, the strongest message of the community's experience is the invitation to the fundamental attitude of always knowing that one is a disciple (learner).

The Salesian vocation in the Middle East is a gift from God. It is the call to become, like Don Bosco, disciples of Christ and to form communities that testify his love as a Good Shepherd to the young people of this “Holy Land”. A call, however, that does not end in a specific act, but is renewed at every moment of existence.

“We respond to this call by committing ourselves to an adequate ongoing formation for which the Lord daily gives us his grace.”²⁶² In responding faithfully to his vocation, every Salesian finds the way to his full realisation in Christ and his way to holiness.²⁶³

The experience that the first disciples had in their encounter with Jesus, the journey they travelled by sharing his life, accepting his mystery, making the cause of the Kingdom their own and taking up the evangelical style proposed by him is also what makes up the experience and journey of every Salesian. The formative and spiritual experience of Belloni, Bormida, Bianchi, Rosin and Srugi remind us that this is the only way for us too. The Salesian is above all a disciple, a disciple in the faith, and thus, and only in this way, can he become a teacher in the faith of the young. The only way to be Salesians in the Middle East, faithful to the particular call that the Lord has made to us, is to live in continuous discipleship, and consequently in continuous formation.²⁶⁴

Formation is joyfully accepting the gift of a vocation and making it real in every moment and situation of existence. Formation is the grace of the Spirit, a personal attitude, a pedagogy of life.²⁶⁵

Christian formation is a process that aims at forming in the believer “the mind that was in Christ Jesus”,²⁶⁶ indeed, from a Christian perspective it should be specified that it is

²⁶² C 96.

²⁶³ Cf. C 2. 22.

²⁶⁴ Let's start by saying that formation is ongoing, particularly if Christian formation, precisely because it consists in the Father's plan and desire to form the mind of Christ in us. Now such a project has an immediate and intrinsic characteristic of totality-integrity, since

- it embraces the whole person, right to his inner depths, his every feeling and emotion, instinct and desire, conscious or unconscious;
- it extends to all of life, since a limited period of time certainly cannot be enough to achieve such a goal;
- it even includes death, since the Christian becomes conformed to the mind of the Son especially when he is conformed to him through the mystery of his own death;
- at the same time it happens, in every instance and situation of life, even those that seem the most adverse, since this plan is carried out by the Father, in whose great hands every circumstance of life can become a providential, albeit mysterious, mediation of his salvation and this divine desire;
- it touches on all levels and dimension of formation: the human and the psychological (affective, relational, intellectual...), the spiritual (formation of conscience, spiritual experience, or the various aspects bound up with the vocation of special consecration ...).

Cf. A. CENCINI, *L'Albero della vita*, 260-264.

²⁶⁵ Cf. *The Formation of the Salesians*, 1.

²⁶⁶ Cf. *Phil 2:5*.

the Father who carries out this formative process (it is only the Father, in fact, who knows the Son and who can therefore achieve this conformation, in the Spirit). To the Salesians in the Middle East, God spoke through the spiritual experience of the pioneers of the Province. By interpreting the history of the Beitgemal community in the light of faith, the following elements are identified as essential parts of the identity of the Lord's disciples as Salesians in the Middle East: guided by the Spirit, learning to learn from life, family spirit, openness to listening and to dialogue, Christian forgiveness, charity and service as a way of configuration to Christ and, finally, openness to the possibility of martyrdom.

1. Guided by the Spirit

God's gift of the Spirit makes believers understand and welcome his saving plan, which is manifested in Jesus, the crucified Christ. The Spirit shapes the identity and action of the disciples who, precisely because marked by his work, are called to live in a "spiritual" way in their following of Christ.²⁶⁷

Before being a "human attitude", spirituality is presence, grace, gift of the Spirit of God.

Of themselves, the Salesians are a community of the baptised submissive to the bidding of the Spirit,²⁶⁸ but the particular circumstances of the Salesians in the Middle East require a special openness; not moving away from Salesian spirituality, but on the contrary, living with depth the same fundamental attitude Don Bosco had:

In openness to the working of the Spirit, Don Bosco successfully interpreted the signs of the times and responded to new needs in a wise, creative and practical manner. The contact with reality was woven into the fabric of his vocation.²⁶⁹

The experience of the saints is indeed excellent because, in one way or another, they were able to welcome the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives, summing up *everything* in the cross of the Son. It is the *docility* [*docibility* or ability to be taught] of their heart to

²⁶⁷ "The Spirit arouses and nourishes those profound dispositions that are in conformity with God's plan, in antithesis with those of the 'flesh', that is, with an existence closed in on itself and extraneous to God's plan. It is the Spirit that makes it penetrate into the hearts of believers. the love of God, which becomes a source of brotherly love. The Spirit of God arouses in those who believe the attitude of filial confidence of Jesus, which is expressed in the invocation Abba 'Father' (...) The Spirit of Christ the Lord is the guarantee of the freedom of the disciples in comparison with the old existence and is the source of a new dynamism of life characterised by love." CEI EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, PROCLAMATION AND CATECHESIS, *Lettera ai cercatori di Dio*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 2009, 60-61.

²⁶⁸ Cf. C 2.

²⁶⁹ *The Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Principles and Norms. Ratio fundamentalis et studiorum*, SDB, Rome 2000, 37.

the Spirit that is the model for us, rather than the different expressions or results of their spiritual journey.

It is not the events experienced by Fr Belloni, Fr Mario Rosin or Simon Srugi that we are called to reproduce. But their ability to see the action of the Spirit in their history, past and present.

Only in this way can we be faithfully Salesians and living members of the Church in the Middle East. In fact, one of the most significant traits of Eastern spirituality is to leave ample space for the divinising action of the Spirit.

Hence it follows that the main function of formation, both for local confreres and missionaries, is to shape a heart open to the Spirit:

...capable of living faith explicitly as a source of meaning, as a criterion for interpreting experience and life, what one feels in his heart, what seduces and attracts him, frightens and disturbs him, but also that part of human experience, past and present, proper to every man, more difficult to accept and contrasting with the natural need for human happiness and harmony, meaning discomfort, aggression, emptiness, obscurity, self-refusal, suffering, old age, failure, failure, change, crisis, death...²⁷⁰

For authentic believers it is the Spirit who educates and animates this memory. “He will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you”,²⁷¹ “He will guide you into all the truth.”²⁷² He is the vital synthesis capable of producing spiritual memory because he is able to grasp the radical meaning of reality, filling all the paradoxical tensions of life with meaning. This is the way to become significantly Salesian in the land blessed with the presence of Christ, but so affected by poverty, war, hatred and persecution.

2. Learning to learn from life

The challenges of our mission land are truly unpredictable and highly provocative; it would be impossible, disappointing and frustrating to try to prepare for individual possible situations.

None of the Salesians in Beitgemal could have imagined what God and circumstances would require of them. Those who were able to face difficult situations are those who had a fundamental attitude of trust in God and in life.

²⁷⁰ A. CENCINI, *L'Albero della vita*, 130-131.

²⁷¹ *Jn* 14:26.

²⁷² *Jn* 16:13.

A Salesian in the Middle East who wants to respond faithfully to God's call will have to initiate a learning process through which he recognises God's ongoing forming action, at times evident and at other times hidden, but nevertheless present in every event.

A Salesian in the Middle East is called to have a readiness for the action of the Spirit at work in his own history and in his own reality; an intelligent and attentive, enterprising and flexible availability which allows him to live every day of life and every relationship, every age and season, every place and every circumstance, even those that are new or those that seem adverse, as times and opportunities for formation, as times and opportunities for configuration to Christ.

The greatness of Fr Belloni, Fr Varaia, Fr Corradini, Bro. Bormida, Fr Bianchi, Fr Rosin, Bro. Srugi and the other Beitgemal confreres was precisely this ability (openness to the action of the Spirit in their life) to let themselves be formed by history, to enter into spiritual dialogue, in a Paschal and relational dialogue, with reality.

3. Family spirit

"To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation"²⁷³ says Article 49 of our Constitutions. Salesians in the Middle East live in a context that seems to be scattered²⁷⁴ and very demanding in spiritual and pastoral terms.

Community life, with its regular rhythms and its wealth of relationships, will save the individual confreres from emotional loneliness and from those forms of progressive "fading" of the identity of consecrated individuals which are, especially in the Eastern context, a clear form of counter-witness which does not attract, but alienates potential vocations.

History teaches us that it is urgent to attend to a community atmosphere;²⁷⁵ Fr Varaia, a keen disciple of Don Bosco, was able to invest time and effort to look after the community atmosphere during his position as first Salesian Rector in Beitgemal in the delicate process of the merger of the two congregations (Brothers of the Holy Family, Fr Belloni, and the Salesians); and so we can see how in Beitgemal energies, reinvigorated by

²⁷³ C 49.

²⁷⁴ Due to their presence in 7 different countries, with connection difficulties and great distances, linguistic and cultural differences. Then consider the heterogeneity of origin (17 different nations), the environmental difficulties in which one lives, the distance from countries of origin.

²⁷⁵ By safeguarding the rhythms of prayer (daily, monthly, quarterly), regular meetings between the confreres, periodic scrutinies (as an opportunity for continuous conversion and community discernment), stable times for ongoing formation through the study of the guidelines of the Congregation and of the Church, times of community relaxation, availability for informal communication which is a sign of true fraternity.

common life, were directed to tackling the abundant challenges that the mission brought day after day (instead, we know how from the beginning so much energy was wasted in the communities in Bethlehem and Cremona judging each other: until it broke out in 1915 with the question of the Arab confreres).

The sad events of community division, which came to a painful peak between 1914 and 1919 (but which began a long time before and which in one or another form continue to this day), must not frighten us, or make us ashamed to the point of wanting to erase what historically happened from history. On the contrary, we must remember in faith and love: because those who do not know history are forced to repeat it.

In an environment marked by hatred, revenge, religious and racial discrimination, the community can become a table of salvation for the confreres²⁷⁶ and at the same time, most significant apostolic testimony.

History shows us to what extent even we “men of God” can go when we allow our hearts to be filled with hatred. But it also shows us how far the redemptive action of the cross can reach us.

In the Middle East, just as it was in the past and is now, the witness of communion is our first mission and this is why it is important to see to fraternal relations and the community atmosphere. It is essential to dedicate time to the community to create a family atmosphere, mutual trust, acceptance of everyone’s limitations. It is necessary to help us have understanding, fraternal correction, dialogue and forgiveness among confreres. Then cultural diversity and internationalisation, instead of being an obstacle, will become a resource that encourages peace, love and forgiveness.

But in the case of the Salesian Province of the Middle East, so in need of its own identity, the family atmosphere does not speak to us only of an effort of communion among current confreres. In our case, we also have a strong need for communion with our predecessors. For better or for worse, we owe everything we have to them. And whether we want to accept it or not, we really need to be planted on what they have sown. They are our roots. Often our anxiousness to be the main players leads us to present ourselves as “Alpha and Omega”, and it is here that God really speaks to us through the testimony of

²⁷⁶ Through the sharing of the same gift: cohabitation of individuals becomes a religious community not simply because there are individuals engaged in as many individual spiritual journeys as there are individuals, but when these journeys are put in common to the point of ideally constituting a single one. Then and only then is the charisma at the centre and can one speak of a consecrated community, while friendship becomes the normal way of relating in companionship and solitude, in the sharing of bread on the journey and intimacy with God, in the silence that opens up to relationship and in the dialogue that leads back to unity. Then the ‘house’ of the individual and community is built on rock, and can withstand all storms. Otherwise it is founded on sand, or is a fake community of fake consecrated individuals....” CENCINI A., *I sentimenti del Figlio*, Bologna, EDB, 1998, 134.

Simon Sruji: we can become “something” when we become “a nothing” in God. In this regard:

God has not called us to be super-heroes in the spiritual or pastoral life, He has called us to live and work together, this is a fundamental need and the sure way to fulfil our vocation.

4. Listening and dialoguing

Diversity is often a source of suspicion... if not fear... and even hatred. The Middle East, as we have said many times, is a context characterised by being multi-ritual, multi-confessional, multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural, etc.). Diversity and, above all, differences are always and everywhere present. This presents a difficult challenge and, at the same time, a great opportunity for formation (in the sense of formation as the gradual journey of configuration to Christ, the one who is the image of the Trinity: that agapaic Love which unites by distinguishing and distinguishes by uniting).

Diversity requires an attitude of listening and dialogue that is not always easy. In turn, listening and dialogue require an overcoming of oneself and above all an openness to the other in the intelligence of faith.

There is a huge gap between hearing and listening. Because in listening there is not only a sense of hearing but also a profound perception of oneself, which comes from God who speaks to one's soul. Listening is being attentive inside, it is offering the ear of the heart. Diversity heard is a source of danger and fear, diversity listened to is a source of growth. A profound listening like that of Fr Belloni who allowed himself to be challenged by the needy and the different. Listening like that of Fr Varaia who respected and fully valued the “Brothers of the Holy Family”. Fatherly listening like that of Fr Eugenio Bianchi capable of finding the point of good in everyone and of offering, to each one, the support of someone “who is present” and “who is present for him.”

Only by listening can true dialogue arise. Because in order to truly dialogue, it is necessary to combine acceptance of the other, of the one who is different, with gratuity. Dialogue does not develop where the dignity of the other is not respected and accepted. If the Salesians can provide some service to the various religious and cultural communities present in the Middle East, this service is called dialogue, lived primarily for themselves and educating the younger generations to open up to this healthy relationship.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ “The proper style of service is dialogue, that language of love in which love itself is manifested as attention and availability to others. The fatigue of loving is therefore inevitably reflected in the resistance and risks inherent in dialogue. Just as the gratuitousness of love is dried up by possessiveness, so dialogue does not

Dialogue like that of the cleric Thomas Farah who in the conflict did not judge one or the other but offered himself on behalf of peace. Profound dialogue like that of the brothers who shared their life and suffering with Muslim peasants. Dialogue like that of Bro. Angelo Bormida, willing to forgive those who judged him unfairly, ensuring that love won out over difference.

In the historical and cultural context of the Salesians in the Middle East, the measure of holiness is given by the recognition and acceptance of the other, the measure of responsibility is defined by the necessity, the need, the suffering of which the other is the bearer:

It is from this exclusive “being-for-others”, fully embodied by Christ, that holiness, “responsible personal action”, the openness to the risk of encounter, the overcoming of bourgeois “mediocrity”, the emergence of the whole, complete man who knows no distinction between inner and outer being. We cannot be “complete men” on our own, but only together with others. Man does not give God “some ultimate secret space”, but knows how to recognise Him in the events of life and above all in the inescapable presence of the other.²⁷⁸

Diversity, listened to with interest, proves to be a necessary richness. Only deep listening and sincere dialogue with the diverse and with the differences can open us to an authentic experience and testimony of the relationship founded on the Trinitarian perichoresis.

5. Christian forgiveness

In the church at Beitgemal, above the apse, Jesus is depicted on the cross with the Virgin Mary and St John at his feet. Beside the Crucifix, in large letters, the request of Jesus to the Father is written, regarding his crucifiers: “*Pater, dimitte illis*”.²⁷⁹

Our confrere Fr Domenico Dezzutto, 84 years old but still young, at the end of his explanation to the groups whoever they are large or small, explains those words by saying:

really exist unless it is prompted by gratuitous initiative, free from calculation. Nothing is more opposed to the authenticity of dialogue than strategy or tactics: where dialogue is a means of dominating the other or of using it for one’s own ends, it ceases to exist. Dialogue has the dignity of an end and not a means: it comes from gratuitousness and is an offer of encounter that springs from the joy of loving. (...) Dialogue needs exchange, in which giving and receiving are measured by the gratuitousness and acceptance of each of the two. Massification - which ignores the originality of the other - excludes all dialogue, and therefore all authentic attitudes of service.” CEI EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, PROCLAMATION AND CATECHESIS, *Lettera ai cercatori di Dio*, 87.

²⁷⁸ J.M. GARCÍA, *Teologia dell’esperienza spirituale cristiana – temi fondamentali*, Rome, 2010, 377.

²⁷⁹ “Father, forgive them” *Lk* 23:34.

“We all need God’s forgiveness and to forgive one another. This is St Stephen’s message in his invocation: ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” It is the main message that the current apostolate in Beitgemal is trying to convey to visitors.

As the chronicles tell it, the Salesians in Beitgemal, in their enthusiasm for the discovery of the tomb of Saint Stephen, had planned to build, on the site of the mosaics of the Byzantine Church, a large shrine dedicated to “Christian Forgiveness”. They had already obtained the approval of the Holy See, then, for many reasons they abandoned the project, contenting themselves with the current church, a very beautiful one, but of a more modest size.

Of course, in the Middle East, according to what the daily newspapers show, a lot of forgiveness is needed. Some say that there will never be peace there because the two peoples who face each other, Arab-Muslim and Jewish, do not know how to and cannot forgive each other, not having the tradition or culture of forgiveness. And to make peace, as Blessed John Paul II taught, we also need forgiveness:

“There is no peace without justice, and there is no justice without forgiveness.”²⁸⁰

The great shrine to Christian forgiveness was not built... But the Salesians are called by God, by the peoples they serve, by Don Bosco’s own spirituality, by the predecessors of the Province: Belloni, Bianchi, Bormida, Rosin, Srugi to themselves become the very shrines of Christian forgiveness.

St Paul exhorts us: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience”²⁸¹

Our authentic tradition from St Francis de Sales to Don Bosco and on to Dominic Savio shows us that a friendship inspired by God can perfectly integrate "human" aspects; it adds to them its own "grace" and rejects any selfish imitations. This is what is indicated in the first paragraph of the article which, through the mouth of St Paul, invites us as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, to commit ourselves with a generous heart to those attitudes which are typical of evangelical friendship: compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, mutual forbearance and forgiveness: demanding virtues which have always been the mark of true friendship!²⁸²

The Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness had the aim of imploring St Stephen and spreading among the Christian people the full practice of charity, even towards enemies,

²⁸⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *There is no peace without justice. There is no justice without forgiveness*. Message for the celebration of the day of peace, 1 January 2002.

²⁸¹ Col 3:12-13.

²⁸² *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, 332-333.

to extinguish the flame of hatred still alive in poor humanity, both Christian and non-believer, being a centre of prayers and good works at the tomb of the Protomartyr himself.

If we are convinced that God speaks to us through the saints, here is the programme prophetically left to us, here is one of the fundamental attitudes of our being Salesians in the Middle East.

6. Christian love and service, configuring oneself to the mind of the Son

Being signs of God's love among the young and poor of the Middle East is expressed in the fundamental attitude of becoming servants out of love, making available to others freely what has been freely received from God.²⁸³

The heart of the Salesian spirit is "pastoral charity characterised by that youthful dynamism which was revealed so strongly in our Founder and at the beginnings of our Society [and our Province (we can very rightly say)]. It is an apostolic impetus that makes us seek souls and serve God alone."²⁸⁴

These words recall a charity on the move which needs to act and be realised in a practical and passionate way; a charity, however, which is not based on philanthropy but on knowing that we are loved first. Thus charity does not become a stoic exercise but the natural response to the Lord's call to love as he loved us.

Loving authentically is demanding, and in fact "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends".²⁸⁵ Such an oblation is only possible for those who first welcomed the infinite love of God.

Serving in charity is truly challenging, in a context in which the logic that binds people together often experiences the drama of sin and destruction, division and misunderstanding, hatred and war (sadly hatred and wars declared many times in the name of faith, peace, justice or freedom). In a context torn by hostility such as the Middle

²⁸³ "Personal gifts of different orders (intellectual, practical and above all spiritual) are given so that the one called may be able to know and live the values of the Salesian vocation, especially the urgent need for service to poor youngsters, and to take his place in the plan of a community, which is itself a meeting of individuals, which is in fact "Congregation" (the very word expresses the dynamic aspect of the vocational "call"). These gifts are given to enable him to realise himself fully in Christ, the perfect Man.

Here is expressed the certainty that the Lord accompanies with the riches of his grace each one who has been called: how indeed could the Spirit point out to someone a road to be followed without giving him the strength and capacity to follow it? But at the same time the importance is emphasised of the discernment that each one must make to know his own vocation, and verify his suitability for it if he chooses the Salesian life. If he is called, what must he do to respond to God's gift?" *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, 178.

²⁸⁴ C 10.

²⁸⁵ *Jn* 15:13.

East, serving God and others is tiring in many ways ... this is one of the clearest kinds of data in the history of Beitgemal. However, it is this labour that was made his own by the incarnate Son of God, who has thus given new dignity to human work and days. In communion with Him “who laboured with human hands and loved with a human heart”²⁸⁶ the Salesians at Beitgemal recognised that daily toil is the instrument with which to intervene in the transformation of reality in order to conform it to God’s plan.

While awaiting the new heavens and the new earth, the Christian knows he is serving the cause of God in the cause of man. To humanise the world is to serve the Lord who has entered it and works in it with a view to the final “recapitulation” of all things in God. Offered to God in the toil of days, our life can become the way of an ever deeper communion. with Christ, the redeemer of man.²⁸⁷

The Constitutions say that “reading the Gospel [Salesians] become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord”;²⁸⁸ within this charismatic sensitivity we will be able to argue that God – through the life of the two spiritual pillars of the MOR Province: Fr Belloni and Bro Srugi – is inviting us to privilege, for our context, two highly significant passages: the parable of the prodigal Father (Belloni) and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Srugi).

Through his life *Abuliatama* (Father of Orphans – Fr Belloni) was a living reflection of the father who sees his son “when he is still far away” and goes to meet him, listens to the awkward confession of his son who wishes to regain his dignity, embraces and kisses him and has a joyful banquet prepared for him. It is joyful because the son who was lost, or could get lost and die in the world of indifference, has been found and returned to life. Fr Belloni was real transparency of the Father’s goodness for the poor and abandoned children of Palestine, everything that *Abuliatama* offered them (bread, home, family, care, education, fatherhood) referred to a higher reality, to a heavenly reality of love.

Also *Mualem* Srugi (teacher/master Srugi) is God’s living invitation to respond with sincerity to the question, often selfish, that we ask ourselves: Who is my neighbour? Who are those to whom I am genuinely sent? And here Simon Srugi refers us to the good Samaritan as told in Lk 10: 25-37. He does not ask himself how far his duties of solidarity

²⁸⁶ CEI EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, PROCLAMATION AND CATECHESIS, *Lettera ai cercatori di Dio*, 85.

²⁸⁷ CEI EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, PROCLAMATION AND CATECHESIS, *Lettera ai cercatori di Dio*, 86.

²⁸⁸ “Reading the Gospel we become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord: gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to all men; predilection for the little ones and the poor; zeal in preaching, healing and saving because of the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom; the preoccupation of the Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving; the desire to gather his disciples into the unity of brotherly communion.” Cf. C 11.

go and not even what are the merits necessary for eternal life. Something else happens: his heart breaks. Seeing someone in those conditions moves him “in his gut”, in the depths of his soul. And by virtue of the flash of mercy that strikes his soul, he himself becomes the neighbour, going beyond every question and every danger.

Therefore, here the question has changed: it is no longer a question of establishing who among the others is my neighbour or who is not. It’s about myself. I have to become the neighbour, so the other becomes “like me”.

If the question had been: “Is the Samaritan also my neighbour?” then in the given situation the answer would have been a rather clear “no”. But behold, Jesus turns the question upside down: the Samaritan, the stranger, makes himself a neighbour and shows me that starting from my inner self, I must learn to be the neighbour and that I already carry the answer within me. I have to become a person who loves, a person whose heart is open to be troubled by the need of the other. Then I find my neighbour, or rather: he is the one who finds me.²⁸⁹

“Seeing the son when he is still far away and going out to meet him” and “seeing someone injured and being struck at the level of gut-feeling, becoming his neighbour and looking after him” are the school of service, the school of love which Jesus invites us to realise in him and with him; to make his gaze our gaze, his criteria our criteria, his actions our actions, his feelings our feelings. “Whoever loves God is in God; ceasing to live in himself, he lives in him in whom everything has its being.”²⁹⁰

7. To the spilling of blood

The Second Vatican Council affirms that as Jesus, the Son of God, manifested his love by surrendering his life for us and freely accepting death for the salvation of the world, so some Christians were called by God, from the earliest centuries and will be called until the end of time, to bear supreme testimony of love before men, especially before their persecutors.²⁹¹

Martyrdom belongs to being a Christian, because Jesus told us so, when he stated the conditions that one must accept in order to become his disciple: to deny oneself and take on one’s cross to the point of giving one’s life. Therefore, in this obedience – to the Gospel of Christ – there is also the possibility of martyrdom, that is, of giving one’s life in fidelity to the truth and fidelity to Christ, who is the revelation of God.

Martyrdom is intrinsic to faith, not in the sense that one must seek martyrdom, but in the sense that one must keep in mind that martyrdom can exist “for me”. This principle,

²⁸⁹ J. RATZINGER, *Gesù di Nazaret*, Vatican City, LEV, 2007, 234.

²⁹⁰ S. SRUGI, *Massime per i confratelli 2*, in AIMOR. [Cf. Appendix no. 2, thought 289].

²⁹¹ Cf. LG 42.

general for all Christians, is not foreign to Salesian spirituality, as a superficial vision of it might make us think:

The joyful outlook of the Salesian, his profession of kindness and desire to collaborate with others in his work, makes the idea of martyrdom a rather distant concept. And yet pastoral service to the people and dedication to the education of the young cannot be realised without the inward dispositions for martyrdom, i.e. the offering of one's life and the consequent taking up of the cross. Our mission is in fact the giving of ourselves to the Father for the salvation of the young in the manner that he himself prescribes. The same may be said of fidelity to our consecration, which has long been likened to a bloodless martyrdom because of its character of total and unconditioned self-giving.

We live the spirit of martyrdom in the daily pastoral charity, of which Don Bosco said: "When it happens that a Salesian yields up his life whilst working for souls, the Congregation has registered a great triumph". And it is interesting to note that in the context of this daily offering we must be open to the possibility of a cruel martyrdom: "If the Lord in his Providence disposes that some of us should suffer martyrdom, should we be afraid on that account?"²⁹²

Even more, this possibility becomes especially likely in the context of the mission in the Middle East.²⁹³ In Beitgemal it did happen, and history clearly shows that these were not just sporadic episodes.

Martyrdom, being conformed to Christ, bears radical witness to the holiness of God and the dignity of the human being, and the martyr's death paradoxically achieves, beyond time and history, the definitive victory of good over evil. By freely offering their life in union with Christ, martyrs are a living sign of the communion of saints and a source of new life because, by participating in the mystery of the cross, they become part of the dynamic of the power of the Risen One and, by experiencing mystical union with the divine Persons, they continue to build the Church, bringing salvation to the world.

²⁹² J. VECCHI, *Sanctity and Martyrdom at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, in ASC (1999) 368, 4-26.

²⁹³ They recall the proposals of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: "While denouncing persecution and violence like every man, the Christian recalls that being a Christian involves sharing the Cross of Christ. The disciple is no greater than the Master (cf. *Mt* 10:24). The Christian remembers the beatitude of those persecuted because of justice that will inherit the Kingdom (cf. *Mt* 5:10)".

Conclusion

I started with the conviction of the spiritual and formative usefulness of remembering one's history; it is even more enriching if this exercise of memory takes place within a faith perspective, with the certainty that God is really present in history.

Furthermore, I made my own the criterion of spiritual theology which sees in the lives of saints real "privileged places for doing theology". Capable of interpreting an era and becoming points of reference for every time, they are able to indicate some constants of the spiritual life and offer a unified and systematic understanding of the entire experience of faith. In this regard, I set out on an adventure of providing *a reading of the life of Simon Srugi and the Salesian community at Beitgemal (1891–958) in the light of faith*. And this in order to highlight *the elements in it of a Salesian spirituality in the Middle East*.

My starting points did not disappoint me. The exercise of memory proved to be particularly enriching; Simon Srugi's life proved to be a true "theological place"; and the effort to privilege the relational experience of his community turned out to be very positive. I must admit, however, that in highlighting the "relational experience" in depth, I did not go as far as I wanted: first, because I was conditioned by the existing bibliographic and archival material; and second, because even I myself (educated in the current mindset and bound to it) struggle to be faithful to my intuition.

Given all this, original perspectives emerged (for a charismatic and cultural contextualisation) of some constants of the spiritual life. First of all, the renewed awareness of the value and the spiritual and formative implications of awareness and experience of discipleship: one cannot become educators in the faith (of the young, the poor, the Orthodox, Muslims) if one does not live first and continuously as disciples / learners in the faith.

God has spoken to the Salesians in the Middle East through the spiritual experience of the pioneers of the Province. Rereading the history of the Beitgemal community in the light of faith, I was able to identify the following elements as essential parts of the identity of the Lord's disciples as Salesians in the Middle East: *guided by the Spirit, learning to learn from life, family spirit, openness to listening and dialogue, Christian forgiveness, charity and service as a way of configuration to Christ* and, finally, *openness to the possibility of martyrdom*. These were explained in Chapter Five.

In order to appreciate the work in its entirety, I would now like to highlight what, in my opinion, are the merits, limitations and perspectives for the future.

The research offers the community of Beitgemal a valuable historiographical contribution by collecting, in 40 folders, a presentation of the 120 years of history told by the community chronicles.

The identification of the list of confreres who belonged to the community is also interesting. In addition, various data are now available on them: classification by status, years of belonging, origin, perseverance, etc. This may seem an insignificant effort, but in my case it was fundamental to obtaining the list of mortuary letters that I had to read; only in this way have I been able to obtain valuable information that otherwise would not be sufficiently well founded.

This is how I managed to get to the stories of Bro. Angelo Bormida (for me the greatest discovery of this research), Fr Varaia, Fr Corradini, cleric Thomas Farah (this too was a surprise; it is quite something for us to have our own Arab Andrea Beltrami), Fr John Almagian.²⁹⁴ Otherwise these experiences could be lost in the oblivion of ignorance.

Identifying the right mortuary letters and reading them allows me to state something that is not addressed anywhere else: that Simon Srugi's work with Muslims was shared by his confreres to a great extent; that many confreres established sympathetic but somewhat superficial relations with them; and that, instead, it was the brothers who deeply involved themselves in the daily life of the Muslim peasants, thus managing to carry out an excellent activity of indirect evangelisation, including gaining some conversions.

Now I can also affirm that, for reasons explained in the research, the local confreres found it more difficult to work with the Muslims, but those who went beyond themselves in the Lord were able to carry out a highly qualified spiritual and pastoral service.

The recovery of Simon Srugi's writings has been useful (I recognise that I made little use of them, but it is a great advantage for future studies to have them available).

It has also been useful to recall the historical facts of "the question of the Arab confreres" so as not to forget them, but also not manipulate them (reporting only what may be convenient for those whose discourse is biased).

In discussion of epistemological foundations, there is a good synthesis and intelligent intention for the two components of the curriculum to be in dialogue. Indeed, the research was a practical exercise that benefited from this dialogue.

The exercise of interpreting one's history in the light of faith is a formative proposal, one that is theoretically based and quite developed, especially by Professors Roggia

²⁹⁴ Bearing in mind that the significance of the experiences of Fr Belloni, Fr Eugenio Bianchi, Fr Rosin and Simon Srugi was already widespread.

and Cencini. If there is anything new in my research, I believe it can be found in the application of such an exercise to a community experience; this can also be found in the thinking of the professors just mentioned but h in the context of a community application this thinking is still rather generic and hypothetical.

With regard to an interpretation in the light of faith, I believe it has been of great spiritual and formative validity especially for some topics whose wounds are still being felt today: the relationship between local confreres and missionaries, the relationship with the Pastors of the Church, the relationship with Muslims, the attitude/comparison regarding martyrdom/witness both ordinary and extraordinary.

Finally, the elements for a Salesian spirituality in the Middle East proposed in Chapter Five, are certainly neither an exhaustive list nor the fulfilment of any of the topics dealt with there; they propose to offer some significant avenues for awakening the identity proper to the Salesians of MOR and, consequently, for strengthening the sense of belonging to the provincial community.

On a personal level, I must say that I am pleased to have remained faithful to the principles proposed in the preface (that the final contributions of the research would useful for me and those close to me; that the investigation would bring the two components of my curriculum into dialogue: spiritual theology and the sciences of formation; and finally, that this academic effort be a real effort of dialogue between faith, culture and life).

This research was a wonderful opportunity for affective and effective insertion into the experience of the Province. I believe it will certainly help me in my existential task of inculturation.

Although I recognise that the option of developing a wide-ranging theme has its drawbacks at an academic level, I believe that this choice allows me to have an overall view of the reality in which I have to work... in my circumstances, preferable to specialising in a single aspect of it. The research was based on archival sources: for me it was a great challenge, and I have the feeling of not having been up to it. I believe that such a job requires historical and literary skills that I do not possess.

Along the way, I realised that in addition to chronicles, mortuary letters, documents and biographies, another very important source would be exchanges of letters. But the richest archive in this sense is the ASC , access to which presents some problems, as well as implying a job for which I was not prepared and the providing of time that I did not have.

Although what I am presenting historically is quite good material, I am aware of there being some historical imperfections that I would not know how to overcome. For example, despite the demanding work in identifying the list of confreres who lived in

Beitgemal, it is very likely that there is a margin of error (hopefully not very high) both in the list itself and in the complementary data.

The most obvious limitation is the lack of depth of the various topics as a result of the breadth of the theme. I also realised that there were other ideas emerging from the history of the community which I did not want to point out in order not to scatter the contents already proposed.

I consider, as I have already mentioned, that one could be even more spiritually attentive to the relational / community experience. Sometimes the themes are more developed through an over view of individual experiences and not so much a highlighting of the relational side. The thesis offers the basis for continuing the exercise of an interpretation in the light of faith in the years following our research, that is, from 1958 to the present day; in itself, it is known that in this more contemporary period one can discover the spiritual figure of Fr Domenico Dezzutto and his wonderful apostolate of the good press. It is a task I hope someone takes up.

This research also offers itself as a model for carrying out a similar study in the other communities of the MOR Province. The ideal would be to have a sufficiently rich reflection at an historical and spiritual level level, which would allow for a serious re-interpretation of the history of the provincial community.

With reference to Simon Srugi, I thought that his writings should be more valued. Of course it would take not only serious literary criticism, but also theological and spiritual critique, as well as discerning the perennial from the dated in his message. In addition, I believe that Srugi can offer a spiritually competent message regarding certain topics that are still a bit painful: the identity of the Salesian brother, the oriental identity of local Salesians, the apostolate with Muslims.

Finally, what is needed now is a serious pedagogical reflection to help assimilate what is proposed in the research in favour of the ongoing formation of all the confreres, the initial formation of the local confreres and the proper formation in the insertion of the new missionaries.

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Appendices

Note: For now, the appendices will appear in a separate file when completed, but will eventually be added to this file.

1. Lucian's Letter. On the discovery of the body of St Stephen in 415 AD.
2. Simon Srugi's writings.
3. Beitgemal 1958 –2011 according to the chronicles.
4. Biographical notes on Beitgemal's most significant confreres.
5. A list of confreres who lived at Beitgemal (1892–2011) in chronological order according to the first year of their stay in the community.
6. A list of confreres who lived at Beitgemal (1892–2011) in alphabetical order.
7. A list of confreres who lived at Beigemal and then left the Congregation.
8. A list of confreres who lived at Beitgemal and then changed Province.
9. An overview of the presence of the Salesians in Beitgemal.

